

# Appreciating Your Own Resource

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The exhibition entitled *Natural Resources* presents works from the collection of the Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts in new, contemporary contexts, showing associations with current affairs. The title of the presentation refers to the ongoing debate concerning both the climate crisis and the lockdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Although both phenomena are inextricably linked, their mutual conditioning is rarely noticed.

The ecological turnaround in social sciences, social movements and even politics, which has been underway for several years, accompanied by the establishment of independent initiatives for sustainable development, can also be observed in the field of culture. The need to address the inevitable climate catastrophe is evident in artists' works as well as educational programmes and development strategies of institutions such as galleries and museums. Exhibitions are made of recycled materials to minimise waste production. Creators are increasingly talking about refraining from producing new works of art to save energy and resources.

A more considerate approach to the environment, both external and internal, emerged in the wake of the pandemic. The forced isolation and confrontation with the immediate surroundings caused a shift of attention to what is already owned, at hand and in sight. In one of his texts published during the epidemic, Zbigniew Libera wrote, "It's time we realised that for the next 100 years we could organise exhibitions showing works that already exist, stored somewhere in the vast warehouses."<sup>1</sup>

The concept of natural resources is used to describe the wealth that exists without human activity, used in the process of production and consumption. They can be non-renewable, such as coal, oil and gas, or renewable, e.g. solar energy, water or living organisms (plants, animals, ecosystems). Biotic resources in particular are mentioned in the context of the global economic problems and the approaching end of the "era of fossil fuels." These resources are important to us as the inhabitants of planet Earth, so it is easy to think of them as shared commons. However, upon closer examination it becomes evident that the boundaries of their ownership reflect the power of companies and corporations. The resources

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Libera, *Artyści i artystki w czasach zarazy* [Artists in Time of Plague], <https://magazynsum.pl/artysci-i-artystki-w-czasach-zarazy-zbigniew-libera>, Accessed on 8.09.2020.

of public museums, whose collections have been laboriously built over the years, are different. Although they are owned by regional or state authorities, they actually belong to the taxpayers, local communities and city dwellers.

By referring to the cracks revealed during the forced isolation, the narrative of the exhibition casts new light on the issue of the ownership of resources. When the hyper-consumerist economy of growth came to an abrupt standstill, it was easy to verify what truly matters to individuals and entire societies. The shift towards natural and cultural resources could be described as ethical. Attention focused not only on what we could exploit, but also on what we could commune or coexist with, often by giving something in return. The curatorial selection of works from the collection of the Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts highlights the importance of shared natural and cultural resources, but also of personal resources – often hidden from view, ostensibly less important and not necessarily associated with success. Although the economic slowdown turned out to be painful for many, it redrew the lines of social divisions. In this strange and difficult time, the most coveted privilege was a garden and stable employment rather than a posh apartment in a gated neighbourhood and a high-powered job. It was no longer about the obsessive multiplication of wealth, but the sustainable management of your resources. Access to nature (the closeness of which may turn out to be invaluable due to the ongoing global warming), the presence of another person and regular income – these are the greatest sources of a sense of safety. The limitation of stimuli during the slowdown enabled many people to focus on their talents and skills, but also forced them to address their fears and traumas.

The beginning of the exhibition's narrative is marked by a characteristic motif taken from the diptych *Follow Me – Part 3* by the Wrocław-based artist Aga Jarząbowa. An ordinary hen depicted in the drawing symbolises the private sphere, triggering associations with the Polish phrase “house hen” – a pejorative term for a stay-at-home mother. Thus the work addresses the issue of women's unpaid, reproductive work. This underestimated activity, confined to the space between four walls, actually makes an invaluable contribution to the economic development of any country, which became obviously clear during the time of isolation and remote work. Jarząbowa is known for addressing feminist themes, and her protagonists are often young women lost in the difficult reality of adult life. The emancipatory significance of the featured work can also be interpreted in the context of endowing animals with subjectivity, including those which die in great numbers as a result of the industrial meat production process that drastically exploits our planet.

Stanisław Kortyka's special painting *Hope II* from 1982 refers to personal resources. Painted during the martial law period, it shows seed potatoes – tubers with sprouts, which are ready for replanting to produce another crop. The title is closely connected with the circumstances in which the painting was created – a time of an economic breakdown and closed borders – and suggests that hope can be found in the most basic elements of everyday life. The growing sprouts may suggest associations with the vital force of nature and the belief in its regenerative abilities. The situation of isolation and the ensuing overproduction of thoughts appears in Lech Majewski's series of videos and photographs entitled *Poet's Blood*. The main character, a young artist detained in a psychiatric institution, tells a story which is a mixture of facts from his biography, memories, fantasies, fetishes and delusions. Watching the film is like entering the inner world of an oversensitive person, who longs for the life outside while visualising a return to the lost reality through the past. The subject of memory as a personal resource is also addressed by Anna Płotnicka in her *Unfinished Film 2*, in which the artist's daughter's face is obscured by memorabilia from the family cupboard: photographs, amber jewellery, dried leaves. The inventory of personal belongings slowly disappears before our eyes, object by object, resembling the way in which human memory disintegrates or the natural aging of the mind. On the other hand, the vanishing objects gradually reveal the woman's face until it becomes fully visible at the end of the film.

An excess of things is not only a superficial problem of the inadequate size of our flats. We live in a time of global pollution – not only with smog or plastic, but also with information. The impact of overstimulation and media pressure on the recipient is the subject of Mariusz Mikołajek's work *Windows, Before, After*. Especially in the early stages of the forced isolation, the deluge of often contradictory messages influenced our social behaviour, escalated irritation and fear of the disease.

Łukasz Surowiec's work *Black Diamond*, which is central to the narrative of the exhibition, refers to the Earth's natural resources. Coal mining has not only enabled the creation of the “jewel,” but also influenced the development of industry and consequently – civilisation. The seemingly archaic comparison to the most precious mineral aptly illustrates our economic and even cultural attachment to coal. The artist, known for his collective and socially engaged activities, originally involved unemployed miners in the production of the “diamonds” as a way of bringing them back to the neoliberal market. By appreciating physical work performed in difficult conditions, he drew attention to its unstable and dangerous nature. Cutting coal production entails a number of consequences that will severely affect the most vulnerable unless the right mechanisms are offered to support them.

The social and cultural context of coal mining was also taken up by Paweł Sokołowski in the documentary series *People of Black Gold*. The photographic *Portraits of Miners – The Last Generation* are double portraits of people and places. The images of men in gala uniforms against the backdrop of abandoned mine shafts in the desolate post-industrial landscape of Wałbrzych highlight the work ethos of the people who co-created the currently disappearing heavy industry. The mines in Wałbrzych had been closed long before any discussion about modifying the energy policy began. Travestyng the title of Zbigniew Gostomski's neo-avant-garde project, "It began in Wałbrzych. It could begin anywhere..."

The alchemical dimension of the rock is revealed in the work *Transformation* by Magdalena Wodarczyk. Made of coal and glass, the object resembles an exhibit taken from a geological museum showcase. The artist used a metallurgical furnace to connect the particles of both materials at high temperature. The act of combining two matters has a symbolic dimension. Appreciating both the beauty of nature and the potential of technology (in this case, the furnace process) seems to be an attempt at reconciling two opposing orders.

The achievements of human civilisation, especially architecture, are the area of special interest to Vinicius Libardoni. His detailed etchings are exact representations of Wrocław's public buildings whose glory days are long gone. The Nadodrze Railway Station, which used to be an important railway hub, or the Auditorium of Chemistry, a modern post-war centre of disseminating scientific knowledge – they are monuments to the time of their construction, incarnations of the modernising myth. Their abandoned interiors herald the arrival of a new era in which the primacy of reason gives way to empathy.

Eugeniusz Smoliński in his painting *LandScape* refers not so much to nature itself as to the ways of its representation and imagined functioning. The subject of landscape, which has a long tradition in the history of painting, was approached by the artist in a schematic way, resembling the aesthetics of a map. It was not so much about imitating nature, as about taming it, capturing it with modern tools. Andrzej Dłużniewski, on the other hand, attempted to analyse the power of language over reality. *The Sun* is a painting that belongs to a larger cycle depicting the only star in our solar system. To name the world is to appropriate it. The artist wonders why concepts and words have different grammatical genders in different languages, and whether this fact influences how we understand them. Perhaps the female gender of "nature" in Polish is reflected in how we treat it.

Maciej Albrzykowski's poetic installation called *ArtCticus – Expressive Structure in White* brings to mind the melting glaciers. A paper ship recreated in metal is covered with a thick layer of frost produced by the installed cooling mechanism. The floral patterns

appearing on the object emphasise the aesthetic quality of natural physical phenomena. The contrast between the material and form of the work is striking. Like a transatlantic liner, *ArtCticus* is made of metal, but its fragile form resembles a child's toy rather than a twentieth-century technological achievement. The concept behind the object seems to refer to the fleeting character of the accomplishments of human civilisation vis-à-vis the evolutionary and planetary scale. Michał Kosma Jędrzejewski's *Fitness Library* offers a more humorous and positive outlook on pro-ecological attitudes. The interactive installation enables the viewer to combine business with pleasure, as the saying goes – to cater to the needs of the spirit and body at once. The surreal object can be interpreted in the context of self-sufficiency or as an attempt to break the energy deadlock.

A contemplative attitude towards nature permeates the works by Piotr Błażejewski, whose energising, biomorphic images explore phenomena such as colour and light. The geometrised, symmetrical compositions seem to be a tribute to harmony and natural order. The artist's painterly structures resemble ascetic, abstract totems or the interiors of caves-chapels.

The installation *Still Life with Innocence* by Marcin Berdyszak and the paintings from Kamil Moskowczenko's series *Relics of Lower Silesia* address human spiritual needs and religion as a common resource. Although the works refer to different aspects, both take up the subject of the ongoing crisis of faith and the departure from institutionalised forms of worship. Moskowczenko's paintings depict decaying chasubles slowly devoured by fungi. Berdyszak's installation illustrates the situation of symbolically forsaking a child and childhood in general. Despite the visible toys, the playpen made of kneelers is a place of isolation and confinement.

The sphere of politics is experiencing a similar crisis, and the diminishing public trust in decision-makers, who no longer look after the people, but only their own interests, seems to lead to a radical, irreversible abandonment of the current order. Krzysztof M. Bednarski's *Marx on Wheelbarrows* can be interpreted as a reference to the Polish custom of literally removing unpopular politicians from office by carting them away on wheelbarrows.

The arrangement of the exhibition reveals yet another common resource, which is also at a turning point right now – education. Although marginalised, underfunded and treated as a means of achieving political goals, it still seems to be the only hope for the future. A future that will be full of hardships and challenges, but still a future. It may seem that the present time is the sum of the crises that are putting the old world to the grave and outlining a new

horizon. It is impossible to turn back time, but it is possible to reverse history, to learn from it, to reinterpret what once happened and what is happening right now.