

At the crossroads

On the eve of COP24, the international climate change summit organised in Katowice in 2018, a special report was published by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It informed that in order to curb global warming to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels – which is the maximum threshold to at least partially prevent some of the most tragic consequences of the process for the planet, such as the melting of the polar icecaps, catastrophic weather anomalies or the irreversible loss of numerous ecosystems – complete elimination of global emissions of carbon dioxide by 2050 is required.¹ The findings of the international panel were countered a year later by an analysis prepared by the Australian think tank Breakthrough National Centre for Climate Restoration. As the new report pointed out, the previous estimates failed to account for factors such as permanent effects of sudden and extreme events or the consequences of geological changes. If they too are taken into consideration, it may turn out that 2050 will be a literal “deadline” for mankind – in less than 30 years, global warming may reach the lethal level of 3 °C. We have only one decade to reverse this trend and reduce CO₂ emissions to zero.² A new report by the UN Climate Change Panel, released this August, strikes a similarly alarmist tone. The document indicates that even if we immediately reduced greenhouse gas emissions to zero, the Earth's temperature would continue to rise for nearly 40 years³. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the report a "code red for humanity"⁴.

Therefore, the situation is deadly serious and approached as such in an ever greater number of social life spheres. True, there are many façade reactions, such as the impudent corporate strategy of “greenwashing” or the crocodile tears shed by politicians in international forums, and expert voices are often drowned out by the clamour of climate denialists. However, the rapidly deteriorating state of the planet has provoked the emergence of various activist groups and protest movements striving after radical change – suffice it to mention Extinction Rebellion or the School Strike for Climate. The world of culture and art has not shirked from genuine reflection on Earth’s future either. “The pro-environmental shift (...), which has been underway for a number of years, is also visible in the field of culture,” wrote Joanna Kobyłt in her text accompanying last year’s presentation of works from the collection of the Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts. “The need to address the looming spectre of an inevitable climate disaster is evident in artistic works,

¹ Official website of the IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/> (accessed on 6 September 2021).

² David Spratt, Ian Dunlop, *Existential climate-related security risk: A scenario approach*, Breakthrough National Centre for Climate Restoration, 2019: https://52a87f3e-7945-4bb1-abbf-9aa66cd4e93e.filesusr.com/ugd/148cb0_90dc2a2637f348edae45943a88da04d4.pdf (accessed on 7 September 2021).

³ Official website of IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6): <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/> (accessed 17 September 2021).

⁴ Guterres: Raport IPCC to czerwony kod dla ludzkości, Regionalne Centrum Informacyjne dla Europy Zachodniej - ONZ, 9.08.2021: <https://unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity/> (accessed 17 September 2021).

educational programmes and development strategies of institutions such as galleries and museums.”⁵ Among the visible themes at *Natural Resources*, an exhibition curated by Daniela Tagowska and shown at Wrocław Contemporary Museum in autumn 2020, were questions about the environmental impact of the creative process, the redistribution of artistic works and access to them, but also about art’s potential to activate society.

Although this text is supposed to introduce the exhibition *What after / What for*, it is still worth recalling the previous presentation of works from the collection of the Lower Silesian Zachęta, if only because, similarly to this year’s display, it cannot be read in isolation from the deepening global crisis. What is more, the mutual relationship between the two sets of works featured at the two exhibitions is also extremely interesting. In terms of the narrative, *Natural Resources* was embedded in the “here and now” that comprised different crises (alongside the environmental one, also the pandemic and economic collapse). Although *What after / What for* does not contain a similar reference to the present time, it marks a clear turning point in the story told by the featured works. This is a story oscillating between the idealism and spirituality of the past and the disillusionment of the future; between utopia and dystopia, existence and nothingness. Therefore, in the case of *What after / What for*, it is the gloomy perspective of an apocalypse that becomes the organising category of the presentation.

The exhibition opens with two black and white photographs from Zygmunt Rytka’s series *Beside Art*. In the smaller one, the Warsaw-born artist, who lived in Podkowa Leśna in Mazovia and Sokołowsko in Lower Silesia, recreates the pose of Rodin’s *Thinker* – a figure symbolising philosophy, inspired by Dante standing at the gates of hell. The photograph shows Rytka immersed in solitary meditation while sitting on a tree branch somewhere in the wilderness of Bukowina Tatrzańska. In the captured moment, was he, like Dante, pondering the meaning of human existence? *Constant pursuit (...) satisfies our needs (...) on an ongoing basis, giving the impression of moving forward, but it is actually (...) avoiding the subsequent stops on the endless route*, Rytka wrote about his cycle in 1986.⁶ The larger of the two photographs shows the artist drinking (or kissing) the current of the Białka river in the Tatra Mountains. This gesture can be interpreted as communion with nature, or – given that the artist’s self-portraits are the only realistic representations of the human figure in the exhibition – as a symbolic farewell to the natural state of symbiosis between man and the environment.

Works by Andrzej Klimczak-Dobrzaniecki, Julia Curyło and Andrzej Kosowski, presented alongside Zygmunt Rytka’s photographs as part of the exhibition *What after / What for*, can be viewed as representations of man’s physical, spiritual and intellectual striving for emancipation and securing a special place in the historical order. In a series of three gouaches by Klimczak-Dobrzaniecki, a painter associated with the Academy of Art and Design in

⁵ Joanna Kobylt, *Doceniając zasób własny* [Appreciating own resource], Zachęta Lower Silesian Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts, 2020: http://www.zacheta.wroclaw.pl/upl/browser/files/zasobynaturalne/Joanna_Kobylt_Doceniajac_zasob_wlasny.pdf (accessed on 9 September 2021).

⁶ Zygmunt Rytka, *Beside Art*, 1986: <http://www.sokolowsko.org/zygmunttrytka/obok-sztuki-1986/> (accessed on 13 September 2021).

Wrocław who died last year, we see buildings resembling Babylonian ziggurats or ancient Greek or Roman temples. Kept in natural cinnabar, ochre and blue, the works reflect both the cosmogonic inquiries accompanying man from the dawn of time and the (perhaps contradictory) imperative of leaving a tangible, physical mark of one's existence. The painting entitled *The Source* by Julia Curyło from Warsaw seems to be closer to the Judeo-Christian or Islamic tradition of paradise (lost?). In the centre of the canvas we see a fountain splashing life-giving water, and near it there lies a mythical female figure in a relaxed (or exhausted) pose. The viewer, however, is clearly pushed outside this idyllic (or disturbing?) vision – Curyło thus replicates Marcel Duchamp's gesture from the work *Étant donnés* (multiplied in the exhibition space), limiting the view with a symbolic "keyhole." Eagles guard access to the unknowable – but not the majestic birds, only inflatable toys, clearly belonging to *this* world, not the one *after*.

A rational rather than spiritual approach to analysing the world is quoted in the installation by Andrzej Kosowski, a sculptor associated with the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław. In the environment work entitled *C.D.N.* he cites an extensive passage from the work *On the Generation and Corruption* by Aristotle, one of the fathers of Greek philosophy. "Coming-to-be necessarily implies the pre-existence of something which potentially 'is', but actually 'is not'; passingaway is the end of the existence of something that used to exist," writes Kosowski on the floor in clay letters, knowing that his work will be trampled by viewers coming to the exhibition. The ephemeral installation may trigger associations with the topoi of *exegi monumentum* and *non omnis moriar*, introduced into culture by Horace (another classic, although born three centuries after Aristotle). With this work, the artist from Wrocław challenges the intellectual and physical durability of ideas – they turn out to be exceedingly fragile when confronted with the plastic pebbles and slides making up Monika Polak's work *Only Polymers Left Alive*. Won't a monument built of bronze (or polymers) be more durable than ideas? Especially when, as if to mock Horace, the organic matter able to carry them will go completely extinct? At this point, it is worth referring to an interpretative trope that emerges by reversing the eponymous question of the presentation. We may therefore ask about what we will leave behind – or, to put the emphasis not on the asker's ego, but on the character and content of the less legacy – what will remain after us, but does this question make any sense if we, in the most collective sense, are no longer here?

British artist Kat Austen comes closest to capturing the moment of truth for our unsustainable reality, the turning point between what was and what will be. Her one-hour video *The Matter of the Soul | Symphony* uses images of melting glaciers accompanied by a composition performed on hacked equipment for chemical measurements of the melting Arctic icecaps. However, this is not a symphony, as Austen wants it to be – it is more of a requiem for a dying planet. What will happen after? Answers to this question are provided by Weronika Lucińska, a ceramist from Wrocław, and Zofia Martin, an intermedia artist from Gdańsk. Lucińska's *Landscapes* are two glass-ceramic objects resembling icebergs immersed in the sea. The work *The Trillion Has Eighteen Zeros* by Martin consists of dead insects coated with 24-carat gold on top of layers of copper and nickel. Before applying this laborious procedure, Martin had filmed and photographed the places and circumstances in which she

found the dead bodies of the insects. Thus both artists, each in her own way, document something that is passing away, turning their works into taxidermic traces of life on the planet.

The narrative climax of the presentation *What after / What for* comes with Monika Polak's painting *Unknown*. It shows the dead globe covered with an iridescent, synthetic film. Fascinating though this "lunar landscape" may be, it also looks ominous. It is an unknown and unknowable Earth. Let us treat this vision as a warning and motivation to act. As climate rallies participants chant, there can be no art on a dead planet.