

U-jazdowski

15/03–22/09/2019

exhibition

Human-Free Earth

as part of the project *Plasticity of the Planet*

Artists

Ursula Biemann and Mo Diener, Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert, Bonita Ely, Kelly Jazvac, Agnieszka Kurant, Diana Lelonek, Angelika Markul, the Mycological Twist (Eloïse Bonneviot and Anne de Boer), Pakui Hardware (Neringa Černiauskaitė and Ugnius Gelguda), Tom Sherman, Aleksandra Ska, Monika Zawadzki, Marina Zurkow

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Donna Haraway suggests ‘staying with the trouble’ – rather than ignoring it or running away from it if it proves insoluble.¹ Haraway urges us to take care of the natural environment. This can only succeed if we first recognise the existing problems. The exhibition *Human-Free Earth* and other actions which are part of the project *Plasticity of the Planet* are intended to help us recognise the issues at stake.

We must face the irreversible changes in the natural environment. In Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*,² published in 2007, the author speculates on what would happen to our planet if all the people were to disappear. This is not an apocalyptic vision, however – quite the opposite, in fact. Weisman reflects mainly on how long it would take nature to take over the infrastructure created by humans. He thinks, for example, that after five hundred years, in Europe, and in Poland, the primeval forest would return to resemble its remnants that still persist in Białowieża. The book implies that if we were to disappear, after a while, nature would regain an equilibrium, in many ways akin to the one that existed before the devastation that we have wreaked. Today, more than a decade on from the publication of Weisman’s book, such a vision appears unduly optimistic. Just as people cannot simply vanish just like that, so is it impossible to reverse the transformations that are taking place.³ The starting point for the exhibition and the project is our conviction that the anthropogenic changes occurring on our planet may transform the Earth into an environment that does not support human life.

The intention here is not, however, to whip up an apocalyptic mood, as that would lead back to the well-trodden path of

1. D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham 2016.

2. A. Weisman, *The World Without Us*, New York 2007.

3. See E. Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu*, Warsaw 2018.

wait-and-see, paralysing our thinking and action. Nor should we invest our faith entirely in technological salvation, believing firmly that all we need do is find technical solutions to the increasing acidity of the oceans and to global warming, with results such as the extinction of the species and the ubiquity of plastic proliferation. Both catastrophism and techno-optimism are no more than futile escapism. Once we come to realise that, Haraway's approach appears radical.

Staying with the trouble requires action. As Bruno Latour argues, we can only achieve it through creating new ways of understanding and imagination. The exhibition and the works that we present address that urgent need. The trigger is the concept of plasticity, postulated by Catherine Malabou: the ability to give and receive form, thus applicable both to the active and passive behaviour associated with transformation. Crucially, says the philosopher, at the moment when a new form has been adopted or bestowed, the return to the former state is no longer possible – the previous form has been irrevocably destroyed. Plasticity is destructive in principle, and in some cases can even mean the annihilation of all form; Malabou uses the example of plastic as an explosive material to illustrate this.⁴ In the project *Plasticity of the Planet*, the anthropogenic devastation of the environment is viewed as a specific example of destructive plasticity that can bring annihilation to many forms of existing organic life.

Catherine Malabou herself, when reflecting on the consequences of the irreversible environmental changes develops those aspects of the Anthropocene debate that are based on the premise of an urgent revision of the status of the human and nature. If we accept that we are living in a new geological era

4. See C. Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. C. Shread, Cambridge 2012.

shaped by human activity, we must take on board the two fundamental consequences of that premise. Firstly, nature is no longer a stable, passive, neutral backdrop for human activity but has rather been transformed into a force of incalculable power and unrestrained agency. Secondly, such a transformation was not intentional. Again, 'plasticity of the planet' must be thus understood simultaneously as exposing the Earth to destructive transformation and the planet itself – taken as the broadest definition of the natural environment – as an entity that has taken over an active, subjective role. The force of destructive plasticity has the potential to result in a human-free Earth, life on which will take an entirely different form.

The profound paradox of the Anthropocene would then rely on the fact that humans are losing control of the situation at the very moment when our activity has reached a planetary scale. In the exhibition, the sculpture by Monika Zawadzki shows this symbolically: a decapitated figure that carries its own replica in a plastic shopping bag is a *sui generis* monument to the Anthropocene and to a human-free Earth. Significantly, the sculpture has been executed in plastic.

The singular plasticity of plastic – something that Malabou passes over in her reflections on plasticity – is one of the leitmotifs of the exhibition. Another is the ubiquity and potential indestructibility of plastic, often resulting in a toxic or otherwise adverse impact on the environment. The fact that the plastisphere penetrates the lithosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere is another argument for the environment being no longer conceivable as 'natural'. The materiality and agency of plastic has been explored by Marina Zurkow in her poetic video. Aleksandra Ska reveals its pandemic potential, Bonita Ely creates a vision of its evolution, and Kelly Jazvac

presents a new geological phenomenon – plastiglomerate: a fusion of plastic and stone. Agnieszka Kurant explores artificial fossilisation.

Diana Lelonek examines how plants and animals take over human debris, and in the process discovers a new plasticity of the biosphere. The Mycological Twist (Eloïse Bonneviot and Anne de Boer) presents the evolution of the organic world from the vantage point of fungi. Pakui Hardware examine the phenomenon of infinite regeneration, which is a tangible example of immortal life. It can be seen as key in the plasticity of the Earth as it makes new life forms possible. Ursula Biemann and Mo Diener investigate the role of oxygen in the evolution and development of culture.

Works that employ what could be termed the poetics of the sublime have a special function in the exhibition. Angelika Markul has created a myth about the origins and possible end of life on Earth. Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert explore the relationship between the metamorphoses of people and the planet itself. It is through the perception of the sublime that we have been able to experience all that is larger-than-life and elemental through our culture. The video by Tom Sherman provides a counterpoint to these video installations. He provides a tongue-in-cheek indictment of the dark secrets that lurk at the bottom of the sea, beneath the industrial sea farms.

Human-Free Earth reflects on the unintentional environmental changes that have resulted from human activity.

In contrast, the parallel exhibition *Center for Contemporary Nature*, prepared by Forensic Architecture, confronts the deliberate ecocide, mostly carried out through military action.

Monika Zawadzki

(b. 1977, lives and works in Warsaw)

Plastic Bag

2019

sculpture: polystyrene, epoxy resin, steel frame, foil

The artist chose the materials used in order to enhance the paradox conveyed by the sculpture. Generally, monumentalisation is used to glorify values represented in a sculpture; here, however, the figure is an allegory for something that cannot be admired. To stay in the convention of monumental pathos, one could call this sculpture a monument to the Anthropocene or perhaps the last man on earth. The headless human body alludes to the most surprising and at the same time radical discovery that stems from the discussion about the state of the environment: the changes caused by human activity that may render the world unfit for human habitation are unintended. Man appears as a causative agent who lacks a sense of awareness and has no grip on the situation that he has created. The figure carries a replica of itself, in a crouching position, in the plastic carrier bag. On the one hand, we have a hint at the reproduction of destructive intellectual and behavioural patterns. The destructiveness is emphasised by the fact that the artist has mainly used man-made materials such as plastic. On the other hand, the figure can be interpreted diametrically differently – as a concept of societal change that has replaced models based on the universalisation of individualism with a postulate of generic singleness as the organising principle of human groups. In this take, the sculpture is the monument glorifying the new humans.

Marina Zurkow

(b. 1962, lives and works in New York)

Petroleum Manga

2017

video, 8'38''

What do a police riot shield, fake eyelashes, a parachute and medical apparatus have in common? They are all made of plastic. And not just of one, but of many different kinds of plastic. Marina Zurkow has created an inventory of plastic items, naming their principal constituents: PET, PVC, HDPE, PMMA, polystyrene, polyurethane, ammonia, nylon, paraffin and others. For the commonly used generic term 'plastic' comprises hundreds of all sorts of combinations of polymers. The presentation, inspired by Hokusai's acclaimed *Manga*, brings to mind a primary-school-reader style guide to the world of plastics.

Zurkow's visual list magnifies the sensation of having been trapped in plastic, a snare that we have set for ourselves. In *Petroleum Manga* we find them all: from small, barely noticeable mundane utilitarian objects to those that we now find indispensable.

The artist invited the writers to collaborate – Maureen N. McLane and Ruth Ozeki. The poem *Petroleum Troubador Machine* by McLane is an ironic confession of feeling towards petroleum. In turn, Ozeki invites the viewer to a none-too appetising story with the pessimistic title of *Immortal*.

Aleksandra Ska

(b. 1975, lives and works in Poznań)

Pandemia

2015

installation: infographics printed on PVC, metal frame and plastic elements, steel windmill

collaboration

Maciej Behrendt, PhD

consultation

Jakub Barylski, PhD; Robert Nawrot, PhD; Oskar Musidlak, MA

At first glance the installation appears to be a juxtaposition of experimental results such as information boards with a weird compilation of plastic debris. These props play off against each other in the game of fiction that is taking place – its main tools are the carefully prepared infographics that look like a presentation of the results of the latest discoveries in virusology, with their likely consequences. The infographs carefully employ the rhetoric of scientific facts, aided by the visual executed by means of an electron microscope using negative staining. They provide the turning point in the play of make-believe – the parascientific confabulation that the artist has created. In fact, the illustrations are photographs of compositions created from the plastic debris, and the descriptions are fantasies about the various possible viruses that the images created in this manner could be ascribed to.

The work uses artistic means to question the status of fiction in art and science in order to bring together the potential of both fields for the task of expression and highlighting of the most urgent issues. The installation creates a dramatic and indeed chilling image of the pandemic prevalence of plastic. The inundation of the natural environment by plastic debris has been terrifying and relentless. It has irrevocably infected and altered the habitat of many living organisms.

Bonita Ely

(b. 1946, lives and works in Sydney)

Plastikus Progressus

2017

installation: plastic, cellophane, metal, sound, work on paper and photographs, touch screen

The installation by Bonita Ely takes the form of a futuristic museum presentation of the history of the pollution of water ecosystems by plastics and possible solutions. There are three key dates in the narrative: the invention of Bakelite (1907) – probably one of the first plastics to have been produced on a commercial scale, the proliferation of plastic that has led to ecological catastrophe (2017) and the emergence of genetically modified creatures that feed on plastic waste (2054). The artist conducts an insightful analysis of the pollution of the rivers supplying three cities, demonstrating how our domestic refuse finds its way into the seas and oceans: Cooks River in Sydney, the Kifossis, Ilissos and Eridanos rivers in Athens and the river Fulda in Kassel. The very suggestive images of environmental pollution have been complemented by installations showing plastic-eating creatures from the future. The objects constructed from vacuum cleaners and other plastic rubbish discarded in the streets of Sydney are both humorous and underpinned by a robust political message (*DJ Trumpussy*). In the artist's utopian vision, plastics take care of themselves, having resolved the matter of environmental pollution on behalf of the human species. The pronouncement of one of the protagonists of *The Graduate* (a 1967 film by Mike Nichols) rings prophetic, where he reduces the future to 'just one word: plastics.'

Diana Lelonek

(b. 1988, lives and works in Poznań and Warsaw)

Center for Living Things

since 2016

collection of found objects covered in moss and vegetation

Post-Adidas Environment and *Motherboard Nature* are just some of a number of objects in the Center for Living Things – a para-institution founded by Diana Lelonek in order to collect, analyse and disseminate knowledge about new forms of life. The artist exhibits hybrids and plants and mundane objects that have been deemed useless and, legally or otherwise, dumped as rubbish. In the artist's collection we come across an object that once was a car seat and which has now, covered in moss from the *Brachytheciaceae* family, become a new, living organism. When it comes to the plants, mosses and fungi displayed on the presented exhibits, the term 'useless' does not apply; they are part of a simple system based on an equilibrium between production and reduction. The Center for Living Things focuses attention on the exceptional symbiotic circulation created in these settings, confronting it with human activity and capitalist overproduction. The collection is constantly growing and undergoing incessant transformation, and the 'living things' presented there are not, as the artist points out on the Center's web page, what they used to be.

Agnieszka Kurant

(b. 1978, lives and works in New York)

Mutations and Liquid Assets

2014

bronze, brass, aluminium, silver, steel, certificate of authenticity

Still Life

2014–2017

synthetic stone with synthetic DNA, XNA, plastic-metabolising bacteria, petrified viruses, coltan, cassiterite, gold, wolframite, plastiglomerate, C-print

Post-Fordite

2019

fossilized enamel paint, epoxy resin, iron, powdered stone

Alien Archeology

2019

bezoar stones

Fossilized Future

2019

synthetic amber, mutated fruit fly

The artist has created an archaeology and geology of the future. She explores contemporary phenomena using them to help formulate fictitious yet possible scenarios of the future course of events. Kurant creates alternative visions of what is to come, developing the potential of the phenomena observed both theoretically and artistically. The significant points of reference are the separation and penetration of the natural and the artificial, the organic and the non-organic, the factual and the fictitious. In one of the works, the starting point for speculation about the history of art is an object created as a result of the fusion of four small metal works by acclaimed artists (*Mutations and Liquid Assets*). The remaining works presented at the exhibition have been produced using artificial fossilisation resulting in a para-geological record of the archaeology of the future. Kurant reinterprets the known cases of synthetic fossilisation as well as designing artificial fossilisation herself. She combines fragments of fordites, also known as Detroit agate, which result from the sedimentation of the remnants of car paint in car factories, with other materials, creating fossils inspired by plastiglomerate (*Post-Fordite*). Both works stem from reflection on society's transition from Fordism – related to industrial production – to post-Fordism, which in turn relies on non-material work, capitalisation of knowledge and social relations. The artist designs her fossils for this, most recent, transformation of capitalism. She is also interested in other types of fossilisation. She uses bezoar, the stone-like mass that forms in the digestive tracts of people and animals from the remnants of undigested food (*Alien Archeology*). She combines mutated viruses, bacteria that break down plastic, synthetic nucleic acids and rare minerals (*Still Life*). She also sinks mutant *Drosophila* – the species of choice for genetic research – in synthetic amber (*Fossilized Future*). Synthetic fossils provoke questions about the status and origin of what we consider 'natural'.

the Mycological Twist

(Eloïse Bonneviot, b. 1986; Anne de Boer, b. 1987; live and work in Paris)

Respawn

2014

colour film loop, 28'5''

'I am everywhere but I came from nowhere,' says the protagonist (or perhaps protagonists) of the video by Eloïse Bonneviot and Anne de Boer, the story of the Fungi Kingdom, full of dramatic tension. The video not only gives voice to the fungi but also to the narrative of the myth of how Earth was populated. The history of fungi is a tale of civil wars, great migrations and symbiotic relations between kingdoms. This is a history in which the human species is merely one of the secondary protagonists in the never-ending saga of the fungi. Under the title the Mycological Twist, the artists develop interests related to the issues of Dark Ecology. The Mycological Twist is both a permanent fungus garden and a nomadic artistic project that proliferates like mushroom spores.

Ursula Biemann

(b. 1955, lives and works in Zurich)

Mo Diener

(b. 1961, lives and works in Zurich)

Twenty One Percent

2016

colour film loop, 18'

Between the eternal cosmic processes and an improvised forest kitchen set up near Zurich there spans the story narrated by Ursula Biemann and Mo Diener. A scientific narrative about how the Earth's atmosphere formed is interwoven with an on-camera performance – a recording of the transformation of matter into its different stages. The performer, wearing a suit that feeds him and monitors his metabolic processes, performs extraction, distillation, filtering, reduction and so on. Lab props and complex chemical formulas are juxtaposed with ingredients that could be seen as daily food for a human. The processes shown in the video, and above all the chemical matter in which they occur, supports human life and that of all other living organisms. The chemical composition of the Universe has shaped the material structure of our planet. The eponymous 21 percent refers to the amount of oxygen in our atmosphere, which accounts for the planet's species having developed the ability to fly and to think.

Kelly Jazvac

(b. 1980, lives and works in London, Ontario)

Plastiglomerate Samples

2013

plastiglomerate: plastic, sand, basalt, wood, coral etc

In 2013, Kelly Jazvac together with the geologist Patricia Corcoran and the oceanographer Charles Moore carried out research on the inaccessible Kamilo beach in Hawaii. The team explored a new geological phenomenon: the substance formed by the fusion of melted plastic with sand, stone and other objects found on the beach. They named this mass plastiglomerate in order to show the paradox that this geological artefact represents. The artist proposed to interpret them as ready-mades and she exhibits them as art works. Both Jazvac and the scientists that she collaborated with agree that this fossil should be viewed as an anthropogenic marker of the new geological era that we are living in – the Anthropocene.

Pakui Hardware

(Neringa Černiauskaitė, b. 1984; Ugnius Gelguda, b. 1978; live and work in Vilnius and Berlin)

Extracorporeal

2017

thermo-vacuum formed plexiglas, faux fur, various textiles, various dried plants, silicone, chia seeds, glass, metal holders, sea-urchin spikes, polyester wall, steel rope, metal clamps

Pakui Hardware are interested in the relationships between materiality, technology and economics. They investigate issues related to automation, robotics, synthetic biology and the significance of new materials.

The future of mankind – as well as other species – relies on scientific discovery and in the depths of the oceans, where in the cells of the jellyfish of the *Turritopsis* species and the larvae of the sea urchin the secret of immortality resides. The jellyfish has the ability to reverse its life cycle, returning to the stage of a polyp; in turn, the sea urchin has astounding longevity and resistance to disease. In the works of Pakui Hardware we find inspiration with incredible creatures and the seemingly familiar tropes – shapes and textures reminiscent of animals or people have been juxtaposed with technological elements. These semi-biological, futuristic objects bring to mind shamanic fetishes, exuviae – or the discarded remains of an exoskeleton, or manifestations of cyber-transformation.

Pakui Hardware use synthetic and organic materials in equal measure to create hybrids that appear to expand the meaning of the phenomena that belong in the uncanny valley, bio art and cyberpunk. The artists pose the question: to what extent does technology shape our perception and experience of reality?

Angelika Markul

(b. 1977, lives and works in Paris)

Memory of Glaciers

2017

video installation: colour film loop, 3D animation, 10'51''

music

Côme Aguiar

Angelika Markul employs a specific poetic ambiance intended to bring us into the realm of the mythical. It relies on the juxtaposition of images that allude to the beginning and to the end. The first image is that of the temporary comet 67P, discovered by Klim Churyumov with photographs shot by Svetlana Gerasimenko in 1969 (hence the comet's name 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko). A space probe had been launched in the direction of the comet in the hope of finding some pointers towards how life began on our planet. In Markul's video, the comet is the symbol of that mystery. The second image is that of the icefields in Patagonia, which have been melting due to the climatic changes caused by human activity. The water released by the melting glaciers is contributing significantly to the raising of sea levels. NASA has called the information feature on this topic 'The Melting Beauty'; with Markul, fragments of the glaciers blacken as if affected by gangrene and fall off like amputated limbs in what can be read as a metaphor for the illness that is devouring planet Earth. The human-induced ailment – perhaps incurable – takes us directly to the myth of the undesirable and unpredictable end.

Tom Sherman

(b. 1946, lives and works in Syracuse, USA and Port Mouton, Canada)

Playing with Fire Under Water

2012

colour video, 4'19''

Nature, death and the relationship of man and machine are the leitmotifs of Tom Sherman's works, in which text processed into self-commentary accompanies the viewer through the narrative. In *Playing with Fire Under Water*, we join the narrator to dive into the 'virosphere' – the heavily infected bottom of an open pen fish farm. Sherman comments on the salmon farming prevalent from Norway to Chile and with astounding precision records the chilling minutiae of the catastrophe in the making.

The artist reveals the invisible side of food production that not only poses danger to human life but which also has an impact on the natural environment. The presence of the residual antibiotics that fish are stuffed with encourages the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which affects the composition of the flora of sea and river. New, very dangerous bacteria colonies pose a danger to other forms of life, and as a result to the entire ecosystem.

Gast Bouschet

(b. 1958, lives and works in Brussels)

Nadine Hilbert

(b. 1961, lives and works in Brussels)

Metamorphic Earth

2016

video installation

music

Stephen O'Malley

The hypnotic installation by Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert – which consists of scraps of recognisable images, with flashes of light and darkness – brings to mind the futurism of black-and-white silent cinema, in which the future was sensed through oneiric images rather than related through the narrative. In the work of the artists, we follow the vibrating movement of the anonymous protagonists: people, objects, and celestial bodies, as well as the underwater fauna and flora. Sequences of enigmatic images quickly flash before our eyes and just as rapidly blur into others, resulting in an endlessly transforming creature.

The art of Bouschet and Hilbert is pivoted on the relationships between the human species and its habitat. In their visual and theoretical explorations, the artists postulate the abandonment of the anthropocentric perspective in favour of integrating humans in a complex net of energy flows. There is no annihilation – merely elementary transformation. Bouschet and Hilbert propose that we view Earth as an immortal, ever-transforming body, for which creation and destruction are parts of the same process. Just as James Lovelock, Bouschet and Hilbert perceive the Earth as an immortal, forever-changing body, whose creation and destruction are parts of one and the same process.

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08/08

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