

Raising the Ecological Emergency Flag

At the 2019 edition of the Pohoda music festival, which took place in an abandoned military airfield near Trenčín, Slovak artist Oto Hudec installed a *Flag of the Blue Planet*. Conceived as a reinterpretation of the flag that peace activist John McConnell envisioned in 1969 for the first Earth Day celebration featuring the planet at its centre, half a century later Hudec's version left a gaping hole where the Earth should be. Whereas the original dramatized the finite ecological boundaries of the Earth, warning about the limits to uncontrolled and unreflecting economic growth, the message from the contemporary remake is far more uncertain, pointing to the actual threat to the continuity of biological life itself on the imperilled planet. The disobedient act of cutting out the symbols from national flags is a recurring phenomenon in East European revolutionary histories, when protestors expressed their radical discontent and rejection of existing systems. A similar sentiment of fundamental disagreement with the inaction of political bodies in the face of unfolding environmental breakdown runs through the resurgent climate protests of today. The fact that the flag of ecological urgency was raised in a festival setting, which could be seen as a playground for grassroots democracy since it provides an open platform for the communication and sharing of empowering ideas, skills and knowledge, shows new territories of intersectional allegiance between contemporary art, ecological activism and youth cultures.

In a Britain driven by the Brexit saga, the Glastonbury Festival was another forum for demonstrating widespread concern for ecological breakdown, with festivalgoers coming together to stage a vast living encircled hourglass, the symbol of time running out for the planet. This is the emblem of the freshly formed and internationally sprouting Extinction Rebellion movement that calls for non-violent civil disobedience in order to put pressure on governments to stop biodiversity loss, take immediate actions to reduce carbon emissions and prevent the risk of social collapse. A related campaign started by Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg in August 2018 gained unprecedented global momentum with more than million children in a hundred countries joining school climate strikes the following March. Giving voice to the generation that will experience in their lifetime the dramatic consequences of the criminal inactivity of their elders in ignoring environmental warnings, Thunberg has proclaimed that the house is on fire and without urgent change in all aspects of society an irreversible chain reaction will lead to the end of civilisation as we know it. Similar acts of disobedience are arising worldwide and social media is mobilised in numerous local campaigns that cross-pollinate and share strategies to take back the initiative and overcome institutionalised resistance to change.

treating art as an investment portfolio? Is staging talks about the carbon emissions of the art world at Art Basel a step in the right direction? Finally, how efficient are the actions of individuals in bringing about systemic change to the artworld?

Preeminent spokesman for ecological awareness in contemporary art Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson used this summer's Tate Modern retrospective to address some of these questions. The works gathered for the show all came from European collections in order to avoid transcontinental shipping, opting for truck transport rather than air freight. Commissioned calculations of the carbon footprint of two of his public artworks carried out by sustainability consultants Julie's Bicycle were integral to the section of the exhibition devoted to displaying the artist's engagement with social and environmental issues. There are also weekly video-links with his Berlin workshop employing a hundred members of various professions, and especially designed locally sourced menu is served at Tate's restaurant during the exhibition duration. Addressing the contribution of fast-fashion to ecological crisis, the art institution is offering a 20% discount on the exhibition t-shirt for those bringing an old one for recycling. However, the gallery's approach to climate action did not extend to actually abstaining from the exhibition merchandise, the three-course menu is sold for 50 euros, while the entry to the show is 20. From the artist's side, while readily tick-boxing formal aspects of environmental institutional critique in the non-profit sector without endangering its economic model, as a newspaper interview revealed, he stopped short from considering its repercussions for the mechanisms of the art market on which his success heavily relies. The scale of such production, the top-down organisational structure, involvement in blockbuster exhibition culture and the elitist circles of art collecting, make for a rather narrow scope in implementing meaningful environmental change.

Approaching the issue of ecological critique from another direction, Oto Hudec has arrived at the realisation that to take the climate emergency seriously implies the need to completely rethink the priorities of creative expression, question modes of self-presentation and challenge the undisputed priority of career building. In practical terms, this means moving towards a circular economy of reuse and recycling, not just through the choice of materials but through the dismantling and re-appropriating of older artworks. It also entails consciously deciding to make smaller productions, finding expression through more dematerialised means, and even declining nonessential exhibition opportunities. It is also about trying to envision solutions to international participation without taking flights or transporting largescale artworks over long distances. He also observes that artists through their

Although some democratic bodies have declared a 'climate emergency' in response to these requests, there is as yet little evidence of actually going beyond familiar declarations of intent that stay only on paper, which is also one of the main criticisms directed at the bureaucratised culture of environmental NGOs and ineffectual climate summits. What is more, a growing sense of impending ecological collapse is startlingly accompanied by the rise to power of climate-denying populist politicians, often in league with petro-capitalist interests, who are posing premeditated obstacles on the path to substantive action. President Trump has publicly withdrawn from the international climate agreement signed in Paris in 2015, making it even less likely that it will succeed in its goal of limiting climate change to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. At the same time his administration has sought to pressurise scientists working in federal environmental agencies to downplay the seriousness of climate change and even erased the term from official reports. Other prominent rejectors of climate science in the informal anti-globalist coalition of illiberal governments include the far-right Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, whose policies allow for opening up the Amazon rainforest to development and agribusiness by reducing legal protections for indigenous reserves. Within the once forward-looking Visegrad Four group, populists have also argued with electoral success that climate action policies restrict the nation's freedom to exploit its own natural resources and lead to lower living standards. This has resulted in the paradox of self-declared patriots in Poland allowing the industrial logging of the old-growth forest of Białowieża, while in Hungary areas of protected state-owned land are being privatised and brought into agricultural production.

The ground-up campaigns for decisive action to address climate chaos and species extinction therefore demand the modelling of alternative democratic structures to surmount the institutional paralysis of representative democracy in taking the decisions necessary for planetary survival. The fight against environmental breakdown is not only focused on political engagement but rests equally on personal and professional decisions to disrupt toxic systems in all aspects of human activity. Contemporary art is in that sense not only involved with ecological agendas through artistic eco-activism and paying attention to environmental messages disseminated through engaged artworks, but by submitting its own institutions and conventions to re-evaluation. So, what would it mean to declare a climate emergency for contemporary art? What is the carbon footprint of participating in the artworld, in terms of materials used in producing, transporting and presenting artworks? To what extent will a contemporary artworld fixed on seasonal visits to art fairs and biennials be willing to respond to 'flygskam' or flying shame? How far should questions of ethical funding be extended, or should they be restricted to refusing fossil fuel sponsorship? Can the art market turn sustainable and what are the ecological implications for collecting and

demands, preferences and refusals can exert pressure on institutions, reflecting on the growing understanding that every choice however small adds to the potential transformation of the artworld. Little steps can lead to big shifts, the artist claims.

From his own experience of a period of living and working in constrained economic circumstances and observations on the legacy of conceptual art during socialism, he determines that the prospect of more ecologically responsible artistic practice need not come at the expense of artistic achievement. Amongst numerous works that directly touch on environmental concerns, his *Concert for Adishi Glacier* (2017) records the artist playing a musical composition to the melting ice sheet. Expressing feelings of environmental sorrow, the artist sets out to sensitise viewers towards the planet and work through the tragic disconnect of modern society and natural world. As part of his activist practice, Hudec is involved in the movement No Time to Lose! that mobilizes the cultural and professional community in Slovakia to demand immediate climate action from the government. He is also critical of art activism that could be seen as promoting the artist's personal agenda, with Hudec preferring a collective approach in which the shared goal is paramount, since the magnitude of climate crisis demands that the production of work for art circuits become secondary.

Recognition of the need for profound transformation of artistic as well as social and economic structures also lies behind the long-term aim of the Ex-Artists Collective to withdraw from the institutional artworld. In the view of its two members, Hungarian artists Tamás Kaszás and Anikó Loránt, independence from the conventions and growth-orientation of the existing art system could be achieved by creating sustainable conditions for a slowed-down, ecologically attentive practice in which art making is reintegrated with other aspects of life. Glimpses of this self-sufficient existence can be found in the photos, drawings and film clips of their series *Auto-Anthropology* (2010–), which records their 'exercises in autonomy' on the island of Szentendre on the Danube near Budapest, where they work on building their own home, engage in permaculture gardening, cooking and collecting firewood, or create playful environments for children. Ultimately it is a question of adapting to rather than seeking to escape the unavoidable impacts of climate disorder, felt locally in the frequency and damaging effects of river floods.

Devising individual and small-scale community responses to a coming era of scarcity and societal collapse is a central concern of much of Kaszás's practice. He sees survival in the age of ecological chaos as not just a matter of finding sustainable alternatives to industrial agriculture, but also about the need for new forms of shelter in an era of climatic disruption. Home-building in a post-collapse world would in the first place be a matter of making do with whatever is at hand, a form of *bricolage* that for Kaszás goes beyond the reuse of materials in construction to include the design of tools. It also

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entails turning away from impersonal, machine-like architecture to rediscover the abiding traditions of self-made homes with a direct and emotive connection to their immediate environment, privileging the traditional knowledge of folk science over the technocratic solutions of contemporary science. In his case, and through his long-term collaborative endeavours, he is concerned with resistance to the current system and the implementation of sustainable lifestyle, while his ecological activism takes the form of envisioning his whole practice as a Visual Aid that could be channelled through social movements, with the emphasis on developing tools for future survival.

Combining activist campaigning and utilising the mechanisms of the art market for the benefit of environmental protestors was the strategy Polish artist Diana Lelonek applied in her engagement with the threat to biodiversity loss posed by the relaxing of logging regulations in the Białowieża Forest. Joining the billboard campaign organised with fellow artists in Warsaw, Lelonek made the digital collage *Ministry of the Environment Overgrown by Central European Mixed Forest* in 2017, depicting the governmental building being taken over by vegetation and trees growing on the roof and covering the windows, with no human presence visible. The natural world is presented here not as a passive victim of human intervention, but with an implacable resilience and agency, as if saying that felling the forest is short-sighted since it will destroy the ecological basis of civilisation. The artist did not stop at emanating a message in public space but also produced smaller posters for sale, the proceeds of which were donated to the activists from the Camp for the Protection of the Forest.

Lelonek's understanding that we should not underestimate the power of biological processes can also be felt in her proposal to draw on the restorative abilities of introduced plants, even if they come from non-native habitats, to revitalise an industrially scarred landscape, also offering a pathway to ecological transition to communities afflicted by economic decline. Her project *Seaberry Slagheap* (2018), conceived for an exhibition on the occasion of the COP24 UN climate summit in Katowice, set out to draw on the ability of this hardy shrub from the Siberian steppes to flourish in the depleted soils of a former opencast coalfield of the Konin region. It also included designing a range of locally manufactured superfood products using its fruit as an

example to follow by the local population. Indeed, ecological solutions that encompass both biodiversity issues and carbon capture that rely on natural processes through actions of reforestation and rewilding are among most simple and effective remedies to the current crisis, actively promoted by most radical environmental scientist and campaigners. They stand in direct confrontation with the socially damaging line of the 'good anthropocene' that is supported by big business advocates of profit-seeking technological fixes. Although it is uncertain whether the tipping point might already have been breached, the ecological emergency flags are being raised across the planet and there is a sense that the tide is turning and the social upsurge for effective ecological action is transforming into an irresistible political force. The conditions are now ripe for individual initiatives to take off and snowball into a global movement to unsettle the positions of the self-satisfied oligarchic elites at the pinnacle of the fossil fuel corporate system. At the same time there is a new willingness to step back from individual self-promotion to work towards collective goals. Grassroots ecological democracy campaigns are overtaking and even displacing the paralysed forms of top-down institutional politics, while taking on the populist backlash against substantive climate action. As a consequence of the ramifications of climate emergency for all segments of the social and cultural order, the everyday functioning of art institutions has also been subjected to scrutiny, from energy use to the fair treatment of employees and the ethical sources of sponsorship. In addition to inspecting their own artistic practice in light of environmental impacts, contemporary artists are active participants in climate movements and are using their channels and procedures to develop and promote new forms of ecological sensitivity. Measures to avert climate meltdown, the mass extinction of species and societal collapse are gaining momentum by mobilising across the alternative territories of youth culture, where new social alliances are emerging in which artists are a constitutive part. Despite disenchanting political setbacks, on the thirtieth anniversary of the revolutions of 1989, Central Europe has everything to gain from rediscovering the singularly empowering legacy of the homegrown civic movements that raised environmental protest to the level of systemic social change.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 16 July 2019