

Tremors. Diana Lelonek

curator: Jakub Gawkowski

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for the curatorial project for the exhibition
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The proposed project of Diana Lelonek (b. 1988, Katowice) explores the past and the future of coal mining regions, focusing on the example of Upper Silesia. The reference points for the artist's new work are the industrial history of region and the paintings of Teofil Ociepka - a self-taught painter and coal mine worker. Looking at the past, Diana Lelonek asks questions about the future in the face of the upcoming planetary energy transition. The exhibition consists of a new two-channel audiovisual installation realized on the site of a closed mine, and displayed in a dialogue with fossils, plants, and Ociepka's painting.

The fairy-tale-like paintings of Teofil Ociepka (1891-1978) are filled with lush nature, full of plants reminiscent of ancient giant ferns, horsetails, and forbs. The painting *Miner in the Woods* (1956) depicts a thoughtful miner who sits deep in the forest. Following this lead, Lelonek's project combines the region's social history with a geological perspective. She reaches back to the beginnings of Silesia – to the Carboniferous era and the moment of extinction of the horsetail and wattle forests, which later turned into coal. The story ends at the present moment, when the process of burning long-extinct plants is causing another great extinction of species.

In reference to Ociepka's painting, the two-channel video installation features former coal industry workers in the surroundings of the lush nature that overgrows the site of a disused mine. The protagonists also play the role of a choir: they sing so-called miners' "Songs of Revolt" from the interwar period. The songs, in which voice and sound were intertwined with physical labor, contained the potential for resistance, but also mutual care. They eased the tension of working in extreme conditions, built belonging, and accompanied celebrations. Group singing, treated here as a historical source and a vehicle for relations and emotions, recalls the history of harsh conditions and exploitation, but also of self-organization. The sound of singing, with the intervals of silence lasting several minutes, builds the narrative of the exhibition. It also sets its rhythm, pointing to the cyclical nature of historical processes on a geological scale.

The exhibition combines planetary and local perspectives, geological and labor history, and the language of contemporary art with the so-called non-professional (or naïve) painting. It draws on the methodology of deep history to speak of a present situation of a community at a turning point in the short history of the mining industry. The project is

an organic outcome of the long-term practice and interests of Diana Lelonek, a nationally and internationally recognized artist who comes from Upper Silesia. Her artistic and research practice explores themes of the coexistence of human and non-human organisms.

The exhibition draws inspiration from geology, botany, and art history, and at the same time it fits into the narrative of the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale. It urges us to draw on the artistic imagination and the resources of local traditions in the face of the need to change our approach to the natural environment. The work presents historical and contemporary workers as characters entangled in the history of industry and climate change. The exhibition focuses on the reinterpretation and re-use of existing objects and historical works, such as the "Songs of Revolt" that set the rhythm of the exhibition. This strategy seeks to reverse the logic of continuous innovation and overproduction, and to look for answers to the burning questions of the present in already existing works, testimonies, and past lessons.

Apart from its artistic layer, Diana Lelonek's exhibition also brings a social value. It articulates the possibility of communication between groups and views that are usually antagonized: those involved in the fight against the planetary climate crisis and those defending local traditions. The project asks how to organize the future while remembering the past. How to conserve the environment and the culture? How to transform mining regions while taking care of local traditions created around the exploitation of the natural environment?

Shortened version of exhibition's script.

The project proposes an exhibition which will consist of the following elements:

1. A two-channel audiovisual installation realized on the site of the disused mine "Mysłowice" featuring former employees and workers of the mining industry. The space, overgrown by different plants over the last years, became a space of a lush ecosystem. The individuals will be depicted in the overgrown mine. They will perform the so-called "Silesian Songs of Revolt" from the interwar period, which are preserved in the ethnographic archive of professor Adolf Dygacz. The recording of the work in 2022 will be preceded by a vocal and dramaturgical preparations and workshops. The audiovisual installation, 15-20 minutes long, will be displayed on two screens made of a wooden frame and projection canvas (16:9 format, 525 cm wide, 295 cm high, 30 cm deep; 4:3 format, 400 cm wide, 295 cm high, 30 cm deep).

2. Painting by Teofil Ociepka: *Miner in the Forest*, 1956, from the collection of the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw.

3. Geological and pseudo-geological forms displayed on cubes of various height (lumps of coal with imprints of ferns and forbs from the artist's own collection and from the collection of the Geological Museum; found objects that look like natural geological formations: synthetic fragments found in areas of disused mines, waste dumps, industrial districts. Objects connecting different time registers and personal histories will create a multi-layered dialogue.

4. Ruderal species of plants (*Solidago virgaurea*, *Onopordum acanthium*, *Achillea millefolium*, *Oenothera biennis*, *Artemisia vulgaris*, *Tanacetum vulgare*, *Verbascum*) growing in front of the pavilion. Ruderal species are the first to overgrow areas abandoned by industry. They are the first stage in natural succession - restoration of ecosystems. Temporary planting will be agreed upon with the Foundation La Biennale di Venezia and the Municipality of Venice, planned and carried out by a botanist and greenery designer.