

***Night Herons.* Joanna Rajkowska,
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curator: Monika Fabjańska

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for the curatorial project for the exhibition
in the Polish Pavilion at the
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Night Herons is an immersive installation which considers the relationship between humans and forest animals – and all non-human nature, represented by Poland's woodlands and swamps. The narrative draws on Poland's history and literature as well as on some ancient traditions and rituals – it collapses the past and the present, seeking redemption for atrocities against animals and men.

Cecilia Alemani, Artistic Director and Curator, states that the 59th International Art Exhibition of Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams*, will present artistic visions of “the end of anthropocentrism, celebrating a new communion with the non-human, with the animal world, and with the Earth.”⁹ She refers to posthumanism, developed in response to emerging technologies and discoveries in bioscience that have eclipsed the traditional model of the human established by Enlightenment philosophy. As prominent theorist, Donna J. Haraway argues, “Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture.”¹⁰

The anthropomorphization of human-nature relationship in *Night Herons* allows for a reflection on nature as a silent witness to history. The swamps with their nourishing roots became shelter for Dzidek and his mother escaping imminent death during the war – just as wetlands nourished Maroon communities of runaway slaves in the Americas. Yet, nature is indifferent – Dzidek must survive among other living bodies, in the wilderness where night herons, said to escort the dead to the afterlife, hunt after dark. Their anthropomorphization introduces the main theme of the work, referred to in its epigraph *All bodies agree in certain things*¹¹ (Spinoza). In *Night Herons* – a reflection on human history and timeless nature – the human and animal deaths are one.

Night Herons attempts a translation of human trauma into a non-human one. Dzidek, saved by the swamp, returns there to hunt. His trauma transforms into abuse of others – his abandoned family and the animals he shoots. The installation takes the viewer on a hundred years' long meandering journey through the histories of two families, both of whom had to leave Warsaw in dramatic circumstances, never to return. Traumas passed down from generation to generation haunt these families compelling their descendants return to the forest where the story began, to undo the past. In the central scene, they eat the same swamp roots and employ traditional knowledge of herbs to clean the wounds of hunted animals and heal them in an effort to redeem the past. As the ritual of revivification fails and becomes a burial ceremony, it also signifies the mourning of human loss. Critically, this central scene has its parallels in the two families' histories – the scene of washing the body of the dying companion of Dzidek, and the memory of mass graves weighing on an old man.

The ceremonial of communing with dead animals brings to mind forefathers' eve, an ancient Slavic rite dedicated to connecting with ancestors' souls that inspired Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, 1821-32, one of the greatest works of European Romanticism. In *Night Herons*, the ritual fails, the past cannot be redeemed; the unity with non-human nature cannot be recaptured. Yet, what follows is another ritual. In the darkness of the night, we witness an eerie circle dance of the transfigured: human figures with animal skulls, or maybe animal skeletons holding human heads in their arms. They resemble human-animal hybrids that populate surrealist paintings of Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), whose book *The Milk of Dreams* gave the name to the 59th Venice Biennale Exhibition, which “takes Carrington, her otherworldly creatures, and other figures of transformation [...] on a journey [...] imagining a posthuman

⁹ Alemani, Cecilia. *The Milk of Dreams. Statement by Cecilia Alemani, Curator of the 59th International Art Exhibition*. La Biennale di Venezia, 9 June 2021, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/statement-cecilia-alemani>. Accessed 12 July 2021

¹⁰ Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991: 152

¹¹ Spinoza, B. “*Ethics*,” Part II, Proposition 13 (E IIP13L2). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. E. Curley. Vol. I. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

condition that challenges the [...] “Man of reason” as fixed center of the universe and measure of all things.”¹²

In their dance – outside of the framework of time – human and animal characters of *Night Herons* become one in a dystopian or perhaps futurist frenzy. They dance to white voice singing (an Eastern European folk technique of open throat singing). In this ghostly vision somewhere in the wetlands of Eastern Europe, the bodies of humans and animals are at one only in death. “A substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible,”¹³ wrote Spinoza.

In Polish culture, the scene of an oneiric circle dance, with dancers half-asleep, half in the past and half in the future, is potent and familiar. *The Straw-Man Dance*, one of the most visually arresting scenes of Polish literature, memorable from Andrzej Wajda’s film adaptation of Stanisław Wyspiański’s *The Wedding*, 1901, is ultimately about time. Jasiek fails to blow the horn before the third cock crow and wake the wedding guests from their trance under the spell of the Straw-Man – a human/non-human hybrid. They go on dancing, failing in their mission – to start an uprising to liberate Poland. In *Night Herons*, it is too late to revive old rituals rooted in the intimate relation humans once had with nature, too late to put an end to the divide between nature and culture that originated in Western religions and philosophies. The people who killed the animals are now also dead while night herons watch the dance waiting to guide them to the afterlife. *All bodies agree in certain things*, according to Spinoza, and they do agree in annihilation.

Spinoza’s philosophical system is fundamental for the reflection on current human condition. We may speculate if human and animal life on the planet could be saved had his idea of radical enlightenment become ascendant over Descartes’s moderate variety. Descartes’ dualistic doctrine of mind and matter, was challenged by Spinoza’s uncompromising assertion of the unity of all that exists and the indistinguishability of spirit and nature. His words “God or Nature” earned him a reputation as an atheist, but Spinoza’s view that everything is a derivative of God, interconnected with all existence has influenced environmental theory.¹⁴ Cartesian rationalism, based on the idea of dualism between body and mind, between nature and culture, drawn from a hierarchy in which man alone was the ruler of the planet, eventually produced Modernity, with its notion of progress and capitalist economy.

Spinoza’s ideas were so dangerous for Jews and Christians alike that the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam excommunicated him when “the prince of philosophers”¹⁵ was only 23. Such a censure (*herem*) was not unusual but its language was unusually harsh. In *Night Herons*, among owl cries and other nocturnal sounds of the forest, human/animal hybrids dance to the words of Spinoza’s *herem*, “Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down, and cursed be he when he rises up [...]. The Lord will not spare him....”¹⁶

¹² Alemani, Cecilia. *The Milk of Dreams. Statement by Cecilia Alemani, Curator of the 59th International Art Exhibition*. La Biennale di Venezia, 9 June 2021, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/statement-cecilia-alemani>. Accessed 12 July 2021

¹³ Spinoza, B. “Ethics,” Part I, Propositions 12 and 13 (E IP13). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. E. Curley. Vol. I. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

¹⁴ As acknowledged by philosopher Arne Næss, the father of the deep ecology; see: Rothenberg, David; Naess, Arne. *Ecology, community and lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: 10

¹⁵ Deleuze, Gilles. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Zone Books, 1990: 11

¹⁶ Nadler, Steven M. *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001: 120

The multimedia environment *Night Herons* has been designed especially for the Polish Pavilion to be presented at the 59th Venice Biennale.¹⁹ It takes into account the flow of the audience and attention span characteristic of the Venice Biennial, the architecture of the Polish Pavilion, as well as its exhibition history. It proposes a fresh approach to the presentation in the Pavilion, one that does not repeat the format of previous exhibitions, which in the last two decades most often involved a single monumental object, sculptural installation or projection. The narrative, immersive environment enveloping the audience inside a maze, offering mystery and inviting the viewers to follow various trajectories and thus create personal interpretations, proposes a new aesthetic and spatial experience of the Polish Pavilion which will be refreshing for the returning audience. It also responds to a growing interest of younger generations of visitors in real and VR environments affecting various senses of the viewer.

The multimedia environment will be a maze of 7 chambers linked by several passages. The installation comprises 7 film projections, as well as 9 human marionettes, 5 animal marionettes, 5 parts of the set, and 7 smaller props – all used in the film scenes. It will be dark in the pavilion. The central roof skylight will be covered. The space will be divided into seven rooms by walls of plywood panels on a wooden structure, all painted in matt black. Some of the corners will be curved in order to distort the perspective and soften the space creating a sense of losing oneself in a natural rather than a geometric labyrinth. In order to increase the feeling that the space of the Pavilion has no clear boundaries and to add to the soundproofing of individual projections, there will be a light suspended ceiling made of vertical stripes of soft black fabric of various lengths.

There will be seven rooms, each with its own projector. The projection size will vary from room to room with the largest being in the main room. Likewise, the rooms will be of various sizes with the main projection room being much larger than the others.

Entering the pavilion, the audience will begin in the same chamber, housing the central element of *Night Herons* – a large projection of the ritual of healing and burial of animals, followed by a dance of human-animal hybrids in the darkness of the night. This room is located on the axis of the entrance to the exhibition – its beginning and end, but also the place where passages to some of the next rooms intersect. Their multitude (each room has at least two entrances / exits) means that the hierarchy of space is not obvious, the narrative is open, and the visitor can move in all directions and experience an individual narrative.

¹⁹ A version of the projections which will be used in the installation were streamed once online, as a film, at the 2020 steirischer herbst festival in Austria (Oct. 16, 2020).

While the main projection presents an oneiric ritual taking place outside historical time, the satellite projections narrate events from the histories of two families. But even if they are precisely dated, chronological order of events is lost in the maze – the satellite projections will be seen in an accidental order, allowing the audience to make their own understanding of the story, based on the interconnections they will make among the scenes and their many references to the main ritual. The sense of time is collapsed. The installation dismantles the chronological narrative of humans – in its porous, simultaneous structure events, ideas and objects are connected but do not follow from each other. The meaning is based not only on the narrative, but also on parallels of events. For example, the scene of washing an old man's body is the introduction to the healing ritual in the central projection. Other scenes are also portents of the central ritual, an attempt to redeem the atrocities against animals and humans. Night herons appear in several scenes, awaiting death.

The haunting music of the main projection will travel through the whole pavilion, enveloping the entire installation with a distant echo of white voice singing. Each satellite projection will have its own sound, audible in designated spaces through sound shower speakers. Acoustic solutions will allow for the concentration of sound within each of the rooms.

Besides a projection, each room will house marionettes and set elements, presented in the lit wall niches at different heights.

As a whole, the installation brings together the best traditions of Polish art for which it is known internationally: puppetry and cinematography, white voice singing and, most importantly, the great traditions of Polish national literature and film, with Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* and Stanisław Wyspiański's/Andrzej Wajda's *The Wedding* as close references. All scenes were filmed in natural forest, swamp, and lake locations in Nowogród in Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship in Poland. Literature, theatre, music and film come together in this installation, creating a synthesis, "a total work of art," which, while retaining its many references to Polish culture and history, offers a philosophical reflection on the relationship of human and nature – currently the most pertinent theme in art worldwide, and the main theme of the Venice Biennale Arte 2022.