

***Arbeiterklasse.* Robert Kuśmirowski**

curator: Katarzyna Matt-Uszyńska

Documentation (excerpt) submitted for the competition
for the curatorial project for the exhibition
in the Polish Pavilion at the
59th International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2022

The concept

Polish Pavillon in Venice 2022

Robert Kuśmirowski

Arbeiterklasse / Working Class

The monumental spatial installation *Arbeiterklasse (Working Class)* by Robert Kuśmirowski planned for the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale takes up over a third of the area and consists of several floors and levels. In line with the artistic practice of Robert Kuśmirowski which consists in the reconstruction and copying of old objects, documents and photographs, and creating their confusingly alike imitations characterized by obsessive meticulousness and precision, a monochrome installation is created - a wooden structure with mechanisms, devices and tools in its centre. The installation is based on a man-driven industrial treadmill and a generating winch, the movement of which produces the energy needed to obtain life and work sustaining water and to power a phonograph playing Richard Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*.

The artist and his co-worker seem to be trapped in a skeleton structure, as if in a cage. Their life and work environment becomes a prison in which they toil in several-hour long shifts until utterly exhausted.

Kuśmirowski constructs and sets in motion his 'tower of labour', which through interlocking mechanisms, tools and labour effort (of the artist and his co-worker) reflects the complexity of the production and contribution of the working class. Kuśmirowski's monochromatic wooden construction, like his previous hand-made, strong and labour-intensive spatial installations, evokes nostalgic memories of the times of the former working class.

The subject of Kuśmirowski's interest here is the sharp increase in economic inequality observed by analysts over the last thirty years. In his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the French economist Thomas Piketty argues that unregulated capitalism inevitably leads to the concentration of wealth. Other causes of rising inequality are manifold. The wages of the well-qualified have soared while the low-wage sector has grown exponentially. Traditional industrial workers - the old working class - are increasingly marginalized and replaced by a new working class of precarious labour.

The division of modern society is not only socio-economic, but also socio-cultural. The lines of social division now run not only between the rich and the poor, the elite and the new working class, but also and above all between those who embrace and harness the processes of social modernization in all their complexity, and those who are sceptical about or unable to keep up with modernity, between the winners and losers of globalization.

Kuśmirowski's work refers to the growing inequality between the hard-working population (those formerly on the actual 'bottom', toiling on the 'lower floors', trapped in a hamster wheel with virtually no economic or cultural benefits) and the economically profiting elites (the 'top', the 'bel étage' of society), who define themselves through cultural representation.

The term 'Arbeiterklasse' (working class), according to Kuśmirowski, "is defined and used in many ways. According to the socialist conception, the working class includes those who have nothing to sell except for their labour. Today, the working class consists of blue-collar and various white-collar workers, excluding entrepreneurs and people living off the labour of others."

However, Robert Kuśmirowski's installation and performance refer to inequality not only as an economic phenomenon, but also as a "subtle [social and cultural] difference" that is gaining in importance.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu assumed that social differences are much more subtle than those described, for example, by Marxist theory. A person's position in society is determined not only by their economic, but also by their cultural capital, and the wealth gap is inevitably followed

by differences in tastes, aesthetic preferences and lifestyles. Culture and lifestyle become criteria for social distinction, demarcation and exclusion.

Constructing a multilevel structure in which the 'bottom' ultimately determines the 'top', Kuśmirowski also alludes to the well-known Marxist dialectics of the economic base (relations of production) and superstructure: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being (their life), but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (their political, religious, philosophical and other ways of imagining the society's 'forms of consciousness')."

The artist and his substitute worker set the treadmill in motion and by doing so power the phonograph located on the upper platform, where Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods* is played. The tone of the music becomes slower and quieter or faster and louder, depending on the intensity of the workers' output.

It is the efforts of the working class that make it possible to create culture and a cultural added value for the elite and subsequently their distinction and haughtiness. While hard work is underway on the lower floors, a recording by Wagner resounds at the highest level. When the noise and clamour of hard work and machinery are combined with music, the relation between work and culture becomes visible, audible and tangible.

Wagner's music as an elite experience of art separates its recipient from the other, the top from the bottom tier, the manager from the worker, the artist from the technician, the director from the overseer, etc. At the same time, it is used to unite the elite and the masses in the sense of national belonging and superiority. The consequence of this is nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism.

In the installation and performance of Robert Kuśmirowski, not only does culture become a factor representing and distinguishing the elite, it is also a carrier of identity, ideology and the exclusion of others.

By playing *Twilight of the Gods* Kuśmirowski alludes to the Wagnerian apocalypse which is not merely a myth about the end of the world, but a myth about the end of the world which is to give way to a new one.

Influenced by the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach and the activities of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's, Wagner wrote in 1848 in *Art and Revolution*: "I want to destroy the existing order of things that divides humanity into hostile nations, into the strong and the weak, into the righteous and the lawless, into the rich and the poor, for it only breeds unhappy people. I will destroy the order of things which makes millions slaves to a few, and the latter slaves to their own power and wealth. I want to destroy the order of things that separates pleasure from work, makes work a burden and pleasure a vice, makes one person unhappy for a lack and another for an abundance."

Wagner's opera and culture feeds the sense of superiority in the elite who go to the opera and admire on stage a revolution against a society which they themselves have created and which they would hate to see change.

Economic and cultural elites attend art exhibitions and praise the critique of relations based on the disproportionate division of labour from which they themselves derive the greatest benefit. They oppose to significant changes in society yet accuse 'those at the bottom' of reactionary and narrow horizons, look down on them because the working class does not share their pseudo-morality, their attitudes, their *habitus* and taste. For them, culture remains a risk-free placebo, what Bourdieu calls 'their subtle difference'. Thomas Mann described this attitude of the elite, or the 'international bourgeoisie', who gather to admire Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*, as a "tragicomic paradox."

In his performance, Kuśmirowski joins the ranks of the working class unable to avoid belonging to the cultural elite, thus lays bare the paradox of the artist's social role.

Exhibition Scenario **(short version)**

Polish Pavilion in Venice 2022

Robert Kuśmirowski
Arbeiterklasse / Working Class

THE INSTALLATION

In the centre of the pavilion, a wooden construction which will take up over a third of third of the space and will consist of several floors and levels. The title "Arbeiterklasse" in a way explains the entire artistic installation, which is to become a "tower of work". The collection of mechanisms, devices, tools and one modest sanitary point, strongly indicates the exploitation of man in the proposed only system of work and life. The installation is based on a man-driven industrial treadmill (Polish: Kierat) and a generating winch, the movement of which produces the energy needed to obtain life and work sustaining water and to power a phonograph playing Ryszard Wagner's Twilight of the Gods.

("Kierat" - is a device that uses human or animal tractive power to power stationary agricultural machinery or to extract water) see images attached below Ad. 1.

The artist (Worker) and his co-worker seem to be trapped in a skeleton structure, as if in a cage. Their work and life environment becomes a prison in which they carry out their work in several-hour long shifts until exhausted.

The construction is a 4-story wooden structure with a viewing platform to guard employees, located at the top of the installation. In all rooms that are transparent to the viewer, there will be work or activities enabling this work to be performed. A system of treadmills, winches, generators, mechanisms, gears, axles transferring human power to boxes and energy storage devices to return it to household purposes. The workplace will also be a place to live and the meaning of life for workers.

The audience will be able to walk all around the installation and see it from all sides
The installation is already an eye-catcher from the entrance of the pavilion.

THE PERFORMANCE

The treadmill will set in motion by the artist and the shift worker with great physical effort (from the opening of the Biennale, for a period of 14 days), and power the phonograph located on the upper platform, where the Wagner's Twilight of the Gods is played.

The worker and the co-worker will all the time carry out a series of works related to the generation of electricity necessary to maintain their workplace, which makes it an opposition and opposite action to perpetual motion machines, which is to bring free benefits. (Here without free work there will be no light, without which there will be no work.)

The beginning of the day will consist of an hour's work, walking on the generator's turn to store a sufficient amount of electricity for further scheduled work. The worker will also perform conservation and protection works on the entire production line. The production will be the electricity necessary to be able to perform such work. Today, for most people, the most important thing is to have the job itself, not to get the fruit or the profits behind it.

The work will be carried out in a two-shift system, 4.40 hours for a worker and 4.40 hours for a substitute to perform 40 minutes of work impossible to be performed by one worker unit (one man). The entire artistic performance will be monochromatic in its color, brown, rust, ocher and old wood. There will also be smells of towot, grease necessary for the proper operation of metal and wooden devices.

The whole installation will have a lot of physical work and noise generated from gears, drums, treadmill and the system of moving to other floors. Additionally, we will also experience musical sensations, where one of the gears will power the device of a phonograph playing a piece by Richard Wagner.

Music will be intertwined with the noise of machines and devices.

The tone of the music becomes quieter and slower or louder and faster, depending on the intensity of the workers' output.

This 14-day performance will be recorded and after that projected in the other part of the pavilion's space, separated by a small rigips wall. After the period of 14 days, trained staff guarding the exhibition will move the treadmill for the visiting public once an hour for a few minutes. During this time, projection will be turned off.

TECHNICAL DECTRPTION

- The Installation

The entire Installation will be built on site in Poland and transported and set up in Venice.

All the parts (containing a collection of mechanisms, equipment, tools and one modest sanitary point) to be assembled on site 14 days before the opening of the Biennale.

Size of installation: Height, 4 m/Width 8-9 m

- Lighting

In addition to daylight from the skylight, artificial light will also be used

- Texts for the exhibition:

- Wall text / curatorial text
- Quotes from philosophers, writers and thinkers such as:

Thomas Piketty

Joseph Stiglitz

Ludwig Feuerbach

Mikhail Bakunin

Richard Wagner

Karl Marx

Arthur Schopenhauer

Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau