

## ***VELMA. Teresa Murak***

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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

[reserve project]

## EXHIBITION CONCEPT

Teresa Murak will transform the Polish Pavilion into a space that has just emerged from flood waters. Traces of this catastrophe will be visible on the floor, walls and facade up to three metres, leaving a distinct line marking the level previously reached by water and mud. The interior will be covered with an undulating layer of humid mud, which will spill outside the Pavilion. Visitors will follow a path made by the artist as the first person who found herself in this space after the cataclysm. Murak's several subtle interventions in mud brought in by the flood will be situated halfway between natural and human creation. The exhibition will develop a spectacular apocalyptic vision, while remaining a silent, minimalist and contemplative work of art. It will be based on the contrast between the abrupt gesture of destruction and the delicate tenderness of repair efforts. Visiting the Pavilion will offer a unique experience of immersion in primeval organic matter, with its humidity, scent and multisensual effect on the viewer.

*Velma* by Teresa Murak represents the unpredictability of forces of nature gone out of control. The Pavilion will become a space where nature's hitherto existing relations of subordination to humans have been suspended. The artist sees this as a chance to establish new relations between the two, founded on the recognition of nature's subjectivity. This postulate is expressed by Murak's subtle interactions with natural mud in the Pavilion. The artist will set the trail across undulating mud, piercing through its heap in the central section. The path will lead the viewers around the Pavilion. Murak's several subtle interventions will consist in scarifying mud with the use of leaven to achieve a seething effect. Murak will also deform slightly the line left by the flood on one of the shorter walls. In some places the artist's work will leave traces of her palms in the organic matter.

Teresa Murak attaches importance to the gesture and process of shaping mud, moulding it, which for her represents the gesture of creation. She sees mud and silt as an "immense melting pot of life" – a biostimulant, which enhances life processes. Although the interventions in the Pavilion will echo some of the threads from the artist's previous work, the proposed exhibition is an entirely new project, conceived with the Polish Pavilion in mind.

Murak's art has consistently focussed on nature for several decades, recognising it as a space to reflect on the essence of the world and spirituality. She does not approach nature as a material or tool, but as an equal partner in her work, whom she offers her presence and care. Murak reflects on human relations with nature, drawing inspiration from such sources as spirituality, mysticism, meditation, prayer. She looks from a spiritual perspective at territories that have come to be inhabited by post-humanist thought and activist stances. The artist was always ahead of the discourses that acknowledge human dependence on nature, not only in the context of the ruthless exploitation of natural

resources, but also at the level of hidden elementary ties – “discovering the essence of things and one’s own essence” – which physically make our bodies part of the global natural environment as well as the flows of matter and energy that occur therein.

The same meanings and references are present in reflection on mud. This abject matter contradicts aseptic cleanliness desired by modernity, while being directly related to humans, as proposed by the clay hypothesis, which sees mud as the source of life. Earth, understood as soil, mud and silt, is not dead inert matter – it is a fundamental infrastructure sustaining life on the planet.

„Velma” is a Venetian dialect word for mud, which also refers to mudflats in the Lagoon of Venice. These emerge at low tides and are vital for the area’s unique and fragile ecosystem. For decades, “velme” have been gradually disappearing as the result of human activity that fuels the climate crisis, which for Murak is simply our own, human catastrophe. As a city that might likely find itself underwater in the future, Venice is one of the places that particularly acutely experience the climate change, which threatens the future of the world and humankind.

From the beginning of her career Teresa Murak has addressed the questions of ecology, which have now come to acquire such urgency. Guided by an inner imperative, she approached them in a groundbreaking way, using her own artistic language, which has not been sufficiently recognised by the Polish and international art world so far. The exhibition at the Polish Pavilion responds to the ever greater topicality of Murak’s art by highlighting the seminal and pioneering status of her work. Importantly, the show seeks to establish Murak in the international circulation as an artist ahead of her time, whose art has revealed itself as prophetic and timely. Her work is an important voice in today’s debate on ecology and the Anthropocene, but one that speaks from a position other than post-humanist academic discourse and ecological activism. Helping to achieve this goal, a *catalogue raisonné* will be published in English and Polish to accompany the exhibition, exhaustively exploring the oeuvre of the artist who deserves international recognition.

## EXHIBITION SCENARIO SYNOPSIS

In Teresa Murak's exhibition, the Polish Pavilion will look like it has just emerged from flood waters. Traces of the flood will be visible on the floor, walls and facade up to three metres.

The floor and walls of the Pavilion will be secured with a protective structure covered with a layer of mud. Humidity of the mud will be sustained with a closed-circuit water system (discussed in detail further on). Mud will also be found in the entrance hall with a table and seats for the Pavilion staff. It will spill outside the building.

The audience will follow a trail set by the artist through the undulating layer of mud, piercing through its heap in the central section. Following the path, viewers will discover traces of Murak's activity with matter deposited in the Pavilion.

The artist's subtle interventions will consist in scarifying mud with the use of leaven in order to achieve a seething effect. Murak will also deform slightly the line left by the flood on one of the shorter walls. In some places the artist's work will leave traces of her palms in the organic matter.

Mud (150–200 m<sup>3</sup>) will originate from the Lagoon of Venice. It is possible to acquire and transport mud from Isola delle Tresse near Venice, and return it later to the same site. The Pavilion facade will be covered with a mix of paints imitating traces of flood. Its original state will be restored during the deinstallation of the exhibition.

The Pavilion interior will be secured with an installation protecting the floor and walls from contact with mud and humidity. It will be independent from the building – it will not change its shape nor intervene in its structure. The installation will be equipped with a hidden system of pumps and pipes, based on ready solutions used in building vertical gardens. It will enable closed-circuit circulation of water in the Pavilion, removing the necessity of its ongoing supply. The exhibition is therefore suited for a space without a water and sewage connection.

### Protective installation construction plan

The independent installation consists of an external layer of OSB boards, isolated against humidity and protecting the interior of the building.

The next element is the wall and floor structure made of beams, which stiffens the installation, makes the floor slightly inclined (ca 2%, ensuring the outflow of water) and offers space in which to install the water system, which operates on the basis of existing vertical garden technology. Only the water supply technology of vertical gardens will be used – no plants will be present in the Pavilion.

Water in a reservoir under the raised OSB board floor is delivered with pumps to the surface of the walls. Pipes with drip heads in the upper section of the walls dose an

appropriate amount of water, which later returns to the reservoir. The applied technology derived from vertical gardens requires only access to electricity needed to power the pumps.

The last layer is built of OSB boards isolated against humidity and covered with a layer of felt to ensure the adhesion and humidity of mud.

Additional elements, which determine the overall shape of the landforms will be built on a OSB board structure. These will be covered by a manually shaped outer layer of mud.

The exhibition is an entirely new project, conceived with the Polish Pavilion in mind. It echoes some of the threads from the artist's previous work, evoked in archival photographs of her pieces shown here for reference. The show will be accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue in English and Polish, which will exhaustively present Teresa Murak's oeuvre. It will be published after the opening of the exhibition, which will allow for including its photographic documentation. The curatorial text and detailed information will be available online at the time of the opening.