

## **Letting Go**

Curated by **Jan Zálešák**

Participating artists: **Jan Brož, Marek Delong & Anna Slama, Zsófia Keresztes, Pavel Sterec**

Trafó Gallery, Budapest

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Opening 30 March, 7pm

**What might the world have been like before Europeans decided it was theirs to be controlled, before they lost their sense of awe and fear and began to devote their energies to the conquest of space and constant change? And what might the world look like after the hurricane of change sweeps all remains of our proud civilisation from the surface of the planet? For most of modernity the speed at which everything changed was the source of an unshakeable faith in the emancipatory potential of progress. These days, faced by global warming, species extinction on a mass scale, and ongoing systemic risk, the speed of change is more likely to engender an overwhelming feeling of despair. The exhibition *Letting Go* explores the possibilities of stepping out of this vicious circle of anxiety and fear. It's not about utopian visions, but about finding meaning in small things and rediscovering the knowledge that somewhere along the way we lost and that we could so do with right now. And insofar as it offers a glimpse of the future, then this is a future in which mankind will no longer occupy the role it has long deemed its just desserts, that of arrogant master of all it surveys.**

During the last decade, which began with the attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre and ended with the global economic crisis, artists found themselves unable to relate to the future except through a (n)ostalgic return to the ramshackle ruins of modernist utopias. However necessary these attempts at a renewal of utopian thinking might have appeared, they exemplified a fundamental conceptual flaw, in that they clung to the existence of something that had already irrevocably disappeared, to a society formed during the age of industrial capitalism, a society with coherent classes constructed around a sense of belonging and solidarity possessed by self-conscious subjects. The credit crunch of 2008 blasted these illusions out of the water. It confirmed once and for all that 'financial' capitalism had become detached from the material base of industrial production and had shifted its fat arse over to the game of speculation initiated not only by the deregulation of markets, but above all by the dramatic increase in computing capacity and the development of data networks. Just as value ceased to be something stable and became something more akin to a vector or index that could be evaluated using the right instrument, even as it plunged downwards, so too subjectivity gradually changed from something fixed into a constantly updated status, whose value today offers no guarantee of its value at the start of tomorrow's 'trading' with symbolic capital on the markets of social media – past performance does not guarantee future results.

In retrospect it is clear that the post-internet, focused in its early days on the theme of ubiquitous authorship, the blurring of the distinction between the virtual and real worlds (between the online and offline modes of existence) and on attention as currency, was an art practice born directly out of the financial crisis, i.e. out of the same logic behind the operation of capital and networks that caused the crisis. These days we read post-internet art through the dominant mode of its gallery presentation as this became entrenched after the progressive trend was espoused by curators and gallerists. Nevertheless, in the shadow of the white cube, or to be more precise, on the margins of the culture industry (in projects we are familiar with from *newscenario.net* for example, i.e. in close proximity to the indie scene from which the entire genre originated), organic creativity lives on, drawing on its 'subcultural' roots and on the influences of growing up within the matrix and without it. Gothic style, witch house, seapunk and vaporwave – styles and micro-genres associated with the irrational, the supernatural, magic and alchemy – represent a strange but ultimately persuasive bridge between the anxiety we all experience regarding the future, and the logic of contemporary capitalism, a logic far closer to occult rituals, divination and shamanism than it is to the rational processes of Fordist production later adopted by the socialist planned economy.

Academic debates regarding the post-capitalist future and the artistic appropriation of slick corporate language, of the kind we witnessed at the last Berlin Biennale, are closer to the *weird* aesthetic of the artistic undertow than they might appear at first sight. What they have in common is a knowledge of the inhuman character of digital capital and animistic transformation that both technology and finance are going through at present. What for centuries have been simply inanimate objects and machines are now actors with their own intentions, often assemblages of the animate and inanimate. What would be the sense in dissing the achievements of technology

when the future that new technology holds out to us so resembles the 'barbaric' or 'pagan' past, in which gods and spirits resided not only in bodies, but in stones, trees and watercourses?

Given our present predicament the sine qua non for understanding the present and imagining the future might be to give up our (deeply rooted, at least in Western civilisation) ideas of human exceptionalism and the dualism associated therewith. We should at least try to abandon the anthropocentric view of the world, which prevents us from apprehending that we are an integral part of the world-ecology and there is no way we can reflect upon ourselves outside of this framework.

Gradually we are discovering that, if there exists some essence of humanity, it is not to be found through the lens of a microscope. On the contrary, science is yielding up new findings about the extent to which our 'biological essence' is the outcome of the symbio-genetic evolution of many different species. This is the starting point of Pavel Sterec's video essay *Vital Syndicates* (2016–2017). Sterec's approach represents a critical and transversal expatiation on the findings of modern science and culminates in a demand that we abandon seemingly stable, natural categories that, whatever else they may be, are above all the result of historically formed cultural conventions.

Unlike *Vital Syndicates*, which utilises not only the findings of modern science but also its characteristic diction and its arguments from first principles, the installation *Kiss Me I Am Emo* (2017) by Anna Slama and Marek Delong operates on an entirely different principle. It too overturns hitherto rigid categories, one of which is expressivity, which in this work differs radically from that to be found, for instance, in abstract-expressionism. There is no grand narrative of the authorial subject being forged during the process of artistic creation, then to serve as a precursor of the individuation of the subject of advanced industrial civilisation. The strangeness and purposeless grandiloquence of objects and animations by Slama and Delong conceals within itself a secret desire for the rediscovery of pure emotions and relationships, at present being offered to the narcissistic subjects of advanced post-industrial societies only as commodities. However, the crisis simmering at the core of these societies is reawakening a desire for beauty, for love, for friendship, a desire that is of necessity edgy and uncomfortable, because it can no longer be sure of its object.

The proximity of *Kiss Me I Am Emo* and the objects by Zsófia Keresztes in the exhibition space is not only the result of a shared interest in the use of unusual sculptural materials and work with figuration. Like Slama and Delong, Keresztes made every effort to do justice to the vague curatorial concept of the commission. I asked if it would be possible to evoke merely the hazy outline of an image of the future created from a position that might be defined speculatively as inhuman. Keresztes reacted to this challenge with a sculpture that resembles, and not by accident, a totem pole or the stiff movements of bodies that cannot be easily categorised as belonging to the human, plant or animal realm. Is what we see possibly the outcome of further millennia of evolution that has transformed life on this planet beyond recognition? Or is it an image of already existing organisms radically transformed by a liberating desire and the flow of dark, erotic energy?

The motif of a body transgressing and exceeding boundaries which we are still just about willing to regard as human is one of the motifs pursued by Jan Brož in a series of digital prints. The media image of Usain Bolt has become a symbol of the desire to extend the boundaries of human possibilities. Brož uses digital manipulation to drive what we might call the innate transhumanism of this phenomenal sportsman beyond the boundary of the strange. And yet this does not prevent us from identifying with the image. Perhaps the vessel that is our body will be as pliable in the future as our imaginations. Machines (their algorithms) are not only capable of reacting to our ideas but of stimulating them on the level of sensory interface too, while our reactions as recorded by an ever extending battery of sensors return to them. Spaces are forever opening up behind seemingly mechanical and fully automated processes through which raw, irrational energy flows that could help open new horizons – hyperstitions that cannot be included in any calculation.

**Jan Zálešák**

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