

Anna Baumgart / Bury the statue of Apollo

with **Anna Barcz, Agata Baumgart, Stefania Dretler-Flin, Pat Dudek, Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson, Stanisław Węstawski**

The State Art Gallery in Sopot, Poland

27.10.2023 – 28.01.2024

Private view: Thursday 26.10 at 6pm

Curated by Dominik Czechowski

*I'll be there
like one dreaming of his own damnation,
at the edge of the sea
in which life begins again*

— from "A Desperate Vitality" (1964) by Pier Paolo Pasolini

Bury the statue of Apollo is a story about the power of imagination, forms of resistance to heteropatriarchal narratives and binary categorisations, and alternative scenarios for coexistence in the world. Anna Baumgart is one of the most acclaimed Polish artists. Moving fluidly between visual essay, documentary, and music video conventions, she harnesses a feminist perspective as a tool to examine and critique the power structures, gender roles, and privileged historical narratives in contemporary society.

Employing the practices of sharing and hosting as an inherently queer artistic and curatorial method, the exhibition presents Baumgart's new visual essay in dialogue with diverse artworks and bodies, a polyphonic gathering of interconnecting storylines, affects and counternarratives. The starting point is based on a true story. In 1948, a group of teenage girls – pubescent bodies in transition, in a constant state of becoming – drowned in the Gardno lake in northern Poland. It was supposed to be a dream day. The girls wanted to see the sea. The previous night they'd put on a show for the local people about Princess Wanda who drowned in the rapid currents of the Vistula river, staging non-canonical versions of the legend. On the day of the tragedy, two adult chaperones and two men got into boats with them. Nobody knows what really happened, witness statements are incomplete or contradictory. Was it an unfortunate accident, a murder, or a collective (virgin) suicide of nonconforming bodies?

Exploring aquatic symbolism – movement, volatility, and both the mortal and the life-giving forces of water (indefinite hybridity) – and inspired by the method of 'critical fabulation' offered by American writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman, Baumgart proposes the transformation of an ancient myth into a modern fairytale where it is possible to constantly reimagine life. Seeing water (the river) as an unfathomable space suffused in mystery, but also a multidimensional sovereign entity that should be treated with respect as an important social actor, the artist draws upon *Legenda* (1904), a progressive though little-known play by Stanisław Wyspiański. The writer depicted the internal metamorphosis of Wanda who rejected the patriarchal patterns and oppressive social roles, choosing autonomy and self-determination in place of coercion. In Baumgart's fabulation, the river belonging to pagan goddesses and ancestral spirits becomes a transhistorical space for emancipation in which one can create and invent practices of freedom. Rebirth is possible among fantastic-mythical

creatures through ritual, embodiment, bewitchment (and, as Sara Ahmed proposes, 'desire lines') and, above all, through sensual knowledge and the total contagion of biophilia.

Baumgart positions Wyspiański's revolutionary approach to female subjectivity within the context of intersectional non-anthropocentric feminism, and inside the contemporary discourses around the consequences of climate change that necessitate an alternative ethics of cohabitation between humans and non-humans. Refusing the nationalising folklorism, the artist reorients the legend of Wanda toward radical non-violent futurity and new forms of engaged life, in which interdependence and interspecies solidarity prevail. In her visual essay, Wanda is a teenage rebel escaping with the girls into the sea. It is where their agency can finally be performed through the transgression of corporeal and metaphorical boundaries. Through their sticky porosity, fluidity, indeterminateness and diffusion, those wet adolescent 'bodies of water' (Astrida Neimanis) will flow out of the Heteromatrix, beginning new lives and ending the age-old femicide. Interrupting the heroic forms of macho masculinity and sacrificial femininity, opposing fascism, state violence and transphobia. Taking a deep breath in the moment of a Pasolinian "desperate vitality".

In the exhibition, Baumgart's 'cinematographic object' suspended somewhere between moving image, language, imagination and staged experimentation, interacts with other artists' works. In Stefania Dretler-Flin's 1950 woodcut, Wanda is shown as a peasant Ophelia fished out from the depths of the Vistula and mourned by a group of women standing within a wildflower meadow. It roots the legend more in Maria Janion's Uncanny Slavdom (pagan, non-Latin, non-paternalistic) rather than within the Romanticism-imposed 'struggle against the German invaders' national mythology. Franciszka and Stefan Themerson's early experimental film's abstract sonic and visual forms make space for the re-enchantment of the world and the courage necessary for social change, while pointing to the powerful political possibilities behind collective dreaming which is resistant to being flattened to any singular narrative. The exhibition also includes a participatory sound installation in which a 19th-century topographic map serves as a tool of reimagination, the potential to create bizarre fictions and speculative cartographies for deeply ecofeminist ways of communing with the world in the Capitalocene. The accompanying audio recording's fluid narration oozes out through the bodies of an artist and an ecocritic lying in water, which echoes queer Chicana poet and feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *Nepantla* as the space "between two bodies of water [...] in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or gender position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity".

At a time of violently accelerating climate changes and the ensuing ecological destruction, extinction of species and the migration of human and non-human bodies, ***Bury the statue of Apollo*** exorcises the binary opposition between people and animals, nature and culture, inanimate objects and organic matter. The title of the exhibition is taken from 'An Apartment on Uranus' by Spanish writer and activist Paul B. Preciado, who calls for a radical reordering of social life, political transformation, decolonisation of language and an alternative description of the world. "...the impossible is still to come, and the unimaginable is on the way."