

“Tree” - main title

postscript: Land Art Festival 2014 took place in the area of Roztocze National Park

### **The world like a tree**

They were so happy  
the poets of old  
They were like children  
and a tree was their world

Words from the poem “A Tree” by Tadeusz Różewicz have magical power, since even if we substitute “poets” with any other social group, they will still be true. In the past or, if you will, in the days of old, the world has been different for poets and for peasants. A peasant was tied to his land and to trees that the land bore. A tree is a romantic metaphor of everything – permanence, tradition, time, heaven and earth, birth and death, wisdom, invariability, soul, man, nature and the cosmos. The entire story of the world can be summed up in a tree.

This intuition flickered somewhere under the rough skin of the peasant Marcin Duda, who tied himself to a tree, after all not because of pragmatic reasons, but in the name of a pure idea, thus blocking the construction of a motorway. The case known to some from identical media reports in Wiesław Myśliwski's novel “The Tree” is more familiar and more dramatic. Instead of a militant environmentalist – a peasant, instead of a specialized organization – an entity that does not agree with the progress and what it brings. Because the Polish peasant is slightly strange, sentimental in a non-progressive way, the same way as his village. He is still far from the EU farmer who manages his land like a company. Duda clearly doesn't know what's good for him –his daughter Zośka and brother-in-law Franek moan while the engineers and construction workers raise eyebrows in disbelief.

A simple story, a peasant climbed a tree and wouldn't come down, is simply seething with absurd which almost asks for a deeper interpretation. Duda, with zeal worthy of Don Quixote, refuses to accept the inevitable, that is the passing of a certain myth. Just like the tales of knights no longer exist because the world ceased to be a book one can read, similarly the trees disappear because the civilization wants to construct motorways. Although seemingly the mission of defending a tree resembles the struggle of David with Goliath, it's hard to deny Duda some logic, since what is even an entire man's life as compared to lifespan of a tree? Taking his point of view, cutting down of a centuries-old tree because of a temporary, practical measure is absurd, even unethical. Myśliwski's character will not come to an agreement with his opponents, because they are from two different worlds; he speaks of eternity while they speak of a motorway.

The desperate gesture is a personification of a number of conflicts which are also inscribed in the contemporary culture – between progress and its costs, ever more comfortable life and the disaster that the world of nature is experiencing. It is also a clash between two visions of identity that stem from the character of the relationship between man and his environment. In the first of them, he is physically tied to his environment – with the force of his legs and arms he traverses and changes it, the world becomes smaller, but somehow closer, more intimate, and an entity is strongly bound to its fate. A life “well” lived is a guarantee of inner harmony. This term blurs in the latter case, because what does it mean to live “well” in the hustle and bustle of civilization? Identity ceases to be given (by God, providence, or whatever else), inherited or worked out, instead it becomes something that man himself creates.

Choosing a tree as its motto, the Land Art Festival refers to these considerations and calls for reflection on the ephemeral character of something we call the present times or contemporaneity. Each era has its own present time, each era considered itself modern in comparison to the previous one, and the trees lasted consistently since the beginnings of the world. An ecological and ethical message intertwines with aesthetics. Art has served as a toll for artists to give a number of symbolic meanings a visual form. They moved over a sensitive ground in doing so since they worked in the area of Roztocze National Park which celebrates its 40 anniversary and which is a shelter to millions of beings and plants, hence their main concern was to keep their intervention into nature as subtle as possible.

## **A bird sang, a man danced**

Music has accompanied human kind since its beginnings. Man saw divine language in the whisper of the leaves, a roar of thunder or rustle of bushes. According to the vision of Hildegard of Bingen, a medieval mystic, the first man heard the Music of Heaven before the original sin. The figure in **Karin van der Molen's "Listen"** seems to be listening to the compositions coming from the sky and the grass. A human head lies comfortably leaning on an abandoned wagon as if it was a pillow. A giant cranes its neck and directs it to the sun, turning into pure hearing.

We fall into a trap unintentionally at once because what we see encourages something completely opposite; it encourages us to close our eyes and to blend with nature. The Dutch artist has created a vision of a man immersed into the ground, integrally linked to it. The only visible element is an openwork wooden head woven from branches, cuddled into the wooden wagon. It is also a very idyllic picture, bringing associations with a blissful, primary state of nature: a man listening to the rustle of the grass, feeling gusts of wind, rays of sunshine and raindrops on his face is an elements existing in this landscape just like the nearby trees. A giant coexists with nature just like our forefathers, in the middle of a meadow, feeling completely at home, he indulges in the savouring the symphony of nature.

It is possible that the imaginary giant can hear, along with the rattling of insects' wings and bird chirping, the sounds of **Jarosław Koziara's "Procession"**. They stand out on the horizon like dancing shadows, silhouettes. They move with natural lightness to the sound of the inaudible – or audible only to them – tribal music. Slender hands stretch up, with a shape of a coffin floats atop of them. In a dancing step the procession carries it into an unknown direction and purpose – maybe to bury it or, which is also possible, it has just freshly pulled it from the ground.

The mysterious procession from up close turns out to be a monumental construction of heavy wooden pales (the artist used bird cherry tree, which is present at the park in such excess that it has already gained a status of a parasite in the park). Their size commands respect, the natural shape itself mysteriously takes the shape of human figures. A tree is a symbol of man, but also of a bridge between our earthly world and what is intangible, thus a line of horizon where the mourners walk appears as a thin line on the border of this two dimensions. There is also a kind of initial dissonance inscribed into this work: a contradiction between dance and death, which are at odds in the contemporary culture, it all easily gives way to the feeling that celebration during "The Procession" does not downgrade its seriousness.

Music of nature has become a similar inspiration to the artists, like the famous starling's singing inspired Beethoven. Natural sounds present in the environment served as the starting point for **"Playing tree"** by **Aleksandra Szulimowska** and **Paweł Marcinek**. They fixed bells made of cups of glasses, whose sound is pleasant to the ear, to the branches of a tree. With each breath of the wind and move of the branches they give delicate, melodious sounds, and glass decorations glitter beautifully in the sun, they bother the viewer and encourage him/her to look at them. The tree, with the creaking of its branches, whisper and rustle of leaves has turned into a sort of an instrument deliberately designed by man. The desire to produce and listen to the music has been man's eternal need – already the Neanderthal used primitive pipes to communicate with means of music with his kinsmen. We can, therefore, perceive the "Playing tree" in two ways – as a music-visual installation and also in a broader perspective – as a trace of human presence and his transformation of space so that it satisfies his primary aesthetic needs.

## **In the beginning God created a tree**

Svarog threw a stick into the water and in this place grew a tree that was the beginning of the universe, its navel and axis. This is how the Slavs imagined the work of creation. Existence, shaped in the form of a tree, was divided into three parts - the root symbolized the world of the dead, the trunk the world of living and the crown related to the heavens. Somewhere between the roots delved the cockerel who was to crown only once, as a sign that the end of the world is approaching.

**Jarosław Lustych's "Axis mundi"** refers to the relationship between the earthly and spiritual words. A silver birch on water, somewhere in the middle of the forest, is in itself a wonderful phenomenon. A mirror reflection creates an illusion that is twin, mysterious copy is

located somewhere under the impenetrable surface of the Black Pond, on the other, the dark side of the mirror. Two birches joined with a common trunk also constitute a personification of the mystical belief that the root, that is what is invisible, intangible, can be treated as the reverse of the crown. Among different species of trees the artist has chosen the slimmest one, the most fragile and feminine. Witches used to fly on birch brooms and rural peasants, watching the fluttering leaves, imagined these were slender, birch nymphs.

A silver birch, with exposed roots, proportionate to the crown marks the place most holiest of the holy, where a fluent transition between the world of the living and the dead occurs (alchemists tried to grow a similar tree, as they were convinced that metals, including silver, have a plant nature). An ancient place of worship, a strange chapel or maybe even a revelation – no matter which of these associations come to mind – a charming corner of the park takes on a new meaning.

An intimate character is what drives the silver world axis to **“St Christopher” by Sergiy Radkevich**. A viewer, or a casual vagabond, rather contemplates, in an intimate “tête-à-tête”, than watches both of these works (“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” and, as Simon Weil has coincidentally argued in her works “Christ did not say two hundred, or fifty, or ten. He said two or three.”) A walk through the forests and clearings takes on something of a pilgrimage's character when behold, completely unexpectedly, we come across this unusual show at the crossroads. Saint Christopher, the patron saint of the travellers, but also the one, who can make a blessing of good death fall on a man, keeps a watchful eye on the road as if he was waiting patiently for long for this meeting. His presence in the secluded corner seems to be something so natural, that it is even possible to miss the artistic intervention in this case. With St Christopher the entire clearing transforms into a forest sanctuary, a place of reflection.

### To look inside the time

In **“Tomography of a tree” by Mirosław Maszlanka** time hidden under the bark, written in tree rings, got outside. Tight, cylindrical rings that wrap the trunks are almost moving, and the geometrical construction turns towards the viewer and meets his/her eyes halfway. It is possible it will not last for long, falling prey to ants, birds and other forest animals that find their own use for the work.

Space which determines the life of a tree runs in a circle, not in a line, as man's vision of history wants it to be. “why/ was my life/ not like wrinkles on water/ awaken in infinite depths/ like an origin which grows/ falls into layers rungs folds/ to expire serenely/ in your inscrutable lap” - one may ask in the wake of Zbigniew Herbert; the excerpt of this poem was one of the artist's inspiration.

Seconds-lasting circles on water and the age-old tree rings are separated with vastness of time, but they are both a divine, perfect form. For a tree, which grows according to the successive cycles of nature, time is a circle – free of breaks, harmonious, repetitive and infinite. “Tomography” brings out to daylight what constitutes the core of the eternal mystery of nature.

In the ancient world time was cyclical, at some point it would simply turn and begin to go into the opposite direction. The coming of Christianity introduced a term of the end and the beginning, from the miracle of creation to the Last Judgement. The horror of passing found its expression in countless representations of skulls, rotting fruit and demon-Time. However, the serpent which tempted men and brought this calamity on him can be contrasted with another one, which devours its own tail, the Ouroboros, particularly popular in the Renaissance, a synonym of infinity, reversibility and cyclical nature of time.

Such a circle, that has no beginning nor an end, is **Katarzyna Szczypior's “Infinity”**. A sliced pine (overturned by a storm, by no means cut down on purpose) provides an inside into the heart of a tree in a slightly different manner. A simple work, which comes in two versions, a larger and a smaller one, has an open form and invites to come inside, to watch it slice by slice and to dance a crazy, pagan dance of life and death inside. On the other hand, the act of slicing the trunk into almost identical pieces – as if it was bread, not a hard, resistant wood – and impaling it on metal skewers illustrates the fragility and vulnerability of trees to human activities. By the way, comparing a tree to bread is not as abstract as it may seem – both of them are a symbol of life and rebirth, without both of them the man would not exist.

Time cannot be seen or touched, yet the desire to capture it – in order to stop it – is one of

the eternal human desires. **“Time surface”** by **Laura Bistrakova and Iveta Heinacka** refers to the only way available to us of “seeing” time through the signs of its passing. A field of cut – that is set in the ground earlier – wooden stumps spreads infinitely. Snow-white tips momentarily draw attention and introduce some sort of anxiety in a forest valley. This landscape does not necessarily need to be a graveyard of cut-down trees. The trees may just as well grow or show us only a certain part of the plane limited with a white line.

Thus obtained “time surface” is heterogeneous, specific for each of the points (for example, all you need to do is imagine a man or an event from his life in place of the white spot), uncountable and in general non cognizable with any of the senses.

Time and surface meet also in **Aleksander Nikitiuk’s “Form”**. Wooden pales which are stuck into the ground act in the same way like a sundial. To magnify the feeling, the artist dug holes in the ground exactly in a way that a shadow would be cast. Times of a day modify this work at the discretion – they shorten and prolong the shadowy stripes, move them into both directions, but the one, particular hour set by the artists will last until the rain and mud won’t change it. It will inevitably happen within several weeks, if not days. Time as understood by man and nature’s time are two separate things, and the latter, which is not bound by any frames, cannot be tamed, counted, or named. The “Form” may suggest a cast which has been taken from the ground, but also a whole that it constitutes, that is a wave. Its natural, free shape harmonizes with the surroundings where trees and grass are swaying in the wind.

### Signs of man

Orientation in space, giving names to it and marking it is a gesture in which the survival instinct and a particular pride of ownership meet. Various reference points help man move smoothly at the same time they determine the extent of his territory. During the walk a lace signpost suddenly and unexpectedly comes out of the ground. A subtle, embroidered form does not mean anything apart for itself, the aesthetics itself becomes the information. **Katarzyna Wójtowicz and Cezary Klimaszewski** play with our habits in **“Dependencies – objects”**, mocking the communication savour-vivre. A board, which could indicate the name of a town, show direction or inform how many kilometres away is the civilization, disappeared under the cover of lace. It is beautiful, ironic and has its purpose. A strange process takes place, for if what we have been expecting has been taken away from us, if the artists censored our communication with the world and the knowledge which way to go, it means that we have been left on our own with nature, as if in the primeval state. In its second variant the work take on a shape of a web. It is also a sign of presence, not necessarily human, which can loosely refer to the communication web woven by man.

Information objects are practical, not aesthetic, while the things that refer to the informative function are perfectly useless. However, we can find a suggestion in the lace signs – to look more carefully onto the things which are subtle and spiritual; and the web of openwork and floral motifs decorating it is like a repetition of the surrounding vegetation which point out to the things worthy of a look.

In a way this feminine, lace pattern can be treated as a herald of what is going to happen in a subsequent part of the walk. Brides clad in wedding white sway on a pear tree. **Ked Olszewski’s “Temptation”** is like a confession to women which were important in artist’s live, since the dresses hung on the branches are for them and about them (one of the famous poetic confession was “Thou art the Tree”<sup>1</sup>). The artist sees a woman in the tree and a tree in the woman. A spreading pear tree which bears fruit of a shape of women’s hips every year, is a clear and obvious choice which carries a positive message of life, love, fertility and vitality.

Of course it is impossible to escape other associations as some of the viewers will have more melancholic, or even macabre, feelings at the sight of hanging brides. White silhouettes of dresses, lit from within like lanterns, after nightfall can be transformed into ghosts, which will reveal the dark side of feminine nature in the moonlight. The pear tree during the day and at night speaks to the viewer in two completely different tones. In the daylight the light as a haze figures sway in the wind and twinkle seductively with diamond sparkle, after dark they tempt to enter a complete blackness, into the direction of the weak, deceptive light.

What would a “Conversation” with a tree bring? Bolesław Stelmach sits a man on a chair in

<sup>1</sup> These words can be found in R.M. Rielke’s „Annunciation”, K.K. Baczyński repeated them later on.

the middle of a meadow, with knee-high grass surrounding him from every direction and his face turned into the direction of an age-old tree. The chair itself is not the work proper, but the space that is created thanks to it. The tree is not a part of the landscape which you can enjoy for a moment, it becomes a partner in dialogue, since the "Conversation" takes place between the two parties. What does it therefore has to say? A man sits on a chair a bit like a naughty child in the face of somebody much bigger, much older. Although he is strongly convinced that he is the master of all creatures, the tree (even though it has no such intention) could crush him like a fly. The tree looks down from the sky's level, and man looks from below, immersed in the grass like a frightened hare. For the tree tomorrow does not matter, for man it is full of anxiety. The tree is a sanctuary and the man is an animal which finds shelter in its shadow. The "Conversation", although it begins with both sides eyeing one another up and down, ends with the fact of the lost in thoughts king of the animals becoming again a part of nature.

Boundaries, for instance between the world of man and the animal world, between life and death, day and night, are a typical invention of man. Man like to give names, create divisions, classifications. In nature boundaries are flexible, blurred, do not decide or determine anything since nature covers the whole of existence.

A similar boundary is that in "Penetrating objects" by Waldemar Rudyk. A smooth, spacial form of tangled branches suddenly, in an unsymmetrical spot, breaks only to begin running smoothly again. The gap is not an element of destruction but the factor that exposes the title penetration of two objects. Polished branches are smooth as a river stone, they smell with a pleasant resinous smell, they can be touched without hesitation. A subtle, light construction which resembles a nest or a hut makes an impression of being in motion, following the movement of the surrounding vegetation. Despite the fact that it looks so fragile as if a stronger blow of wind could overturn it, the artist took care of its durability. There is a certain metaphor hidden in this fact, since how many beings in this world seem to be living by a lucky coincidence, and yet they have been lasting for ages?

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Forty years, that is the time that Roztocze National Park has been functioning, is not much, yet for a man it is a lot, because it is half of his life. The artists have noticed and commented on the discrepancy between the human point of view and the processes that man has no control over, thus illustrating that the anthropocentric perspective is not the only one, but only one of many. Maciej Duda tied to a tree was also an advocate of a broader way of looking at the world.

Several works correspond with each other and take common treads, allowing us to look differently on nature – not as a place of temporary recreation and rest, but on the reality proper, which may as well exist without the man. The trees are the best proof. The very creation of works was also a return to the times, when hard, physical work determined the ties with the land, and nature at those times was not a separated area in consciousness, but an entire universe. The motto "a tree" demonstrates that it's worth to keep something out of this line of thinking for the contemporary times. The artists enter into a dialogue with nature rather than transforming it for their purposes, pointing out to the ethical proportions which should set the nature of man's relationship with his environment. None of the works was created in an intrusive manner or causing harm to the natural ecosystem, hence in some time they will undergo slow degradation and will blend with the environment. The environment will be the second author of each of them, because the time of the day, weather conditions and the animal activity will make the works change in time. In this sense, none of the artists owns his work exclusively, just as man does not own his environment.

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