

What Would the Greeks Do?

Martyna Nowicka: Your exhibition *T-kollaps* at the Gdańsk City Gallery bears aesthetic and political references to ancient Greece. This is not the first time you've evoked the culture of antiquity in your works – what is the source of this inspiration? Does it originate from 20th century German philosophy?

Zuzanna Czebatul: This is one of the sources, but there are many reasons behind my interest in antiquity. I am fascinated by that culture and attitude to knowledge, which is worth learning. The history, the richness of culture and art, and the development of political systems. I think that just as Catholics wear wristbands that read “What Would Jesus Do?”, we should nowadays reflect on what Greeks or Romans would do if they were in our shoes. Antiquity offers us tools that we still need today: critical thinking, respect for science and philosophy. I think that we should educate ourselves and shape the next generations in this spirit – focussing on criticism, which is now clearly on the decline. At the same time, antiquity is equally attractive when embraced as a refined culture that collapsed at some point.

Reading the note devoted to your exhibition, one may wonder whether you treat references to antiquity seriously or you're rather interested in antiquity as a sort of setting, keenly tapped into by post-Internet artists.

I think that both the show and its textual description are characterised by a certain ambivalence. The choice of plastic as the material with which I erect sublime ancient columns is far from random. I use plastic to re-create Ionic columns, which we often regard as symbols of Greek culture. But I am ironic rather about modern-day culture and our approach to what the notion of antiquity represents today. The material I chose brings to mind packaging, which is such a significant element of the culture of excessive consumption and pursuit of possession. Everything that we may desire, that we may want to buy (and later throw away) comes wrapped in foil. We may even say that the constant protection, wrapping and securing of commodities demonstrates our devout attitude to them. It seems to me that today we adopt a similar approach to yet

another great achievement of the Greeks: democracy.

We wrap it in foil, but we do not use it?

I wouldn't go so far as to say that. I rather mean the way we use it, its entry into the circulation of commodities. Modern-day systems ever more often depart from democracy – and this applies not only to openly autocratic states, but also to the situation in Europe and the US, which is becoming more and more of a plutocracy, the rule of the wealthiest. Money contributes to an ever greater extent not only to the visibility of specific political parties and their reach, but also increasingly determines our choices at the ballot box.

That was the case with the pro-Brexit campaign in Great Britain and with Trump.

In Germany, this explains to some degree the popularity of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland – a nationalistic and anti-immigrant party), sponsored with Swiss money. Can we even talk about democracy if we all fail to receive the same amount of information, and when some actors control the information flow? Nowadays, we should the more so realise the significance of the pillars on which our political system rests – to understand that their basic task is to introduce a certain order into our reality. Politics should leave no room for theatrical populist tricks and optical illusions. In turn, in the exhibition, me and the curator, Gabriela Warzycka – Tutak, sought to transform a specific space into a non-place. With paint and lights, we turned a white cube into an opera stage immersed in a red glow.

*The curatorial text includes excerpts from Derek Jarman's *A Book of Color*: "An object may look red for a while, like the Parthenon in the dying rays of the sun". In this chapter, the filmmaker draws an opposition between being red and looking red. Similarly, in the exhibition we see things not as they are but as they seem to be.*

Yes, you might even say that this exhibition is made mainly of light and air – materials that are the most difficult to grasp. Nowadays, technological progress offers us infinite possibilities of creating illusion, filters for everything, an image of reality distant from reality itself. We live in an era when even documentaries and news broadcasts are subject to processing. Honest politicians and honest people fail to enjoy popularity as they do not seek to simplify answers to difficult questions, they state inconvenient truths... That is why I wanted my exhibition to feature that smoke and those mirrors and to draw the viewer's attention to its own mechanism.

Speaking of mirrors and smoke, plastic and light, I wanted to ask you about the materials. You work a lot with “artificial stones”: sometimes concrete imitates marble, sometimes you create obelisks made of plush. It appears that your stones have recently become softer – plush, inflated – is that a conscious decision?

No, now I’m slowly starting to dream again of concrete or metal [laughter]. My work with materials is very intensive throughout the process of preparing an exhibition or a project, and when I feel that I’ve completed something, I’m usually fed up and an about-turn comes. I started using plush having worked with concrete; after sewing dragons I turned to metal. It’s not about any kind of system, but about intuition and need. I get bored quickly and need challenges. Each material has its own character; it requires a different treatment – like a partner, a friend, a lover, a family member... You need to pay attention to their needs and approach the process consciously, which is what I like a lot.

What are the requirements of plastic?

It’s full of contradictions, almost schizophrenic. It’s very cheap and quick to use, it can be easily cut, but once it becomes damaged, torn slightly, it requires considerable effort and a special machine for pressure welding. To fix it, you need to impose two layers on one another and then weld them together – this is actually how most food products are packed, so this reminds us of consumer culture, which we discussed at the beginning. Vacuum packaging, light and ancient Greeks.

You’re saying that you get bored quickly and therefore you look for new materials. This can also be seen in the system of references present in your work: Christianity here, legends there, there’s also antiquity.

Why do you tap into specific symbolic fields?

That’s a good question, but it’s hard for me to come up with an unambiguous answer, because, just as in the case of materials, it’s hard to talk about a consciously used system. The moment when something begins to form a whole can be very brief, but I surely need external stimuli. In the past, when I was still a student, I was thinking about applying to a residency where I would have to spend a lot of time in a small countryside cottage. My professor said: I don’t see you there. And indeed, I need a constant flow of information – I read a lot, I watch international and local news, I follow history, I watch. Being in a city offers me the stimuli with which my work later begins to form a whole. It’s also difficult to say if it’s the interest in a contemporary phenomenon or the system of re-

ferences that comes first. I cannot say that *T-Kollaps* is an exhibition about the crisis of democracy in an ancient guise: the interpretation depends on the viewer rather than on myself.

Is there a specific moment when you decide that your particular piece will refer to antiquity or to legends?

I think that the answer to that question has to do with the source of my fascination with antiquity. Ancient Greeks tapped into the inventions of other cultures, both in architecture and in mathematics. Archaeological discoveries clearly show that things that we believe to have been achieved by the Greeks were often borrowed from others – and the value of Greek culture consisted in the accumulation of the already existing knowledge, in moving between the accomplished discoveries of others. It seems to me that such an approach to reality and to the multitude of references should characterise artists today. Conveying the richness of the modern-day world, the fluidity of concepts and mutual influences of different cultures is the responsibility of an artist. For instance, I truly admire the Slavs and Tatars collective for such practice – their works regularly demonstrate surprising analogies, for example between Polish “Solidarity” and the revolution in Iran.

Such an approach is also founded on my personal experiences: I left Poland with my parents when I was five; for a long time, I was an illegal immigrant in Germany. Here, I was perceived as someone who abandoned her homeland, but I was not welcome there either; I virtually had no nationality. I do not feel attached to any heritage, I’m not proud of any country, I wasn’t fully accepted anywhere. This gives me the freedom to operate in-between cultures and languages, to combine different experiences. That is why I tap into elements of both high-brow and popular culture, I take interest in confrontations between cultures and classes. Leaving Poland, being an illegal immigrant, and later getting my education from a snobbish Catholic private school – all of this offers me a critical perspective on phenomena I never felt part of.

The combination of elements of high-brow and popular culture can also be seen in your exhibition at the Gdańsk City Gallery: ancient Greece and an inflated installation made of plastic.

Well, yes, I get why you asked me about irony. But, in a certain sense, I stay away from irony, I don’t want to be nonchalant, I’m keen on developing a serious conversation with the audience. If I work for a public institution, funded with taxpayers’ money, I need to know exactly why I do what I do. If we paint the walls

red and put an installation in the centre, I need to know what effect I want to achieve, what feelings I want to elicit from the viewer. It seems to me that the combination of the high-brow and the low-brow: marble and plastic, showing two opposite extremes of the spectrum, allows me to pose questions about what is left, where we are heading, and if we really need that new TV set.

What did the process of transforming marble columns into inflated plastic objects look like?

I had yet another opportunity to work with Lars Paschke, lecturer at the fashion department of Universität der Künste in Berlin and graduate of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. We did our first project together for the Project Room at the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, where Lars helped me to sew dragons' heads. His interest in interdisciplinary collaboration and willingness to put his knowledge and skills to test in a different field are the reasons behind our successful cooperation. For me, in turn, constructing and sewing columns marked a shift of sculpture to previously unfamiliar territories.

*Already through its title, the exhibition *T-Kollaps* bears reference to a temple. This is the first time you've referred to it in your works – did you want to address the sacred sphere or is the temple evoked rather as a symbol of Greek culture?*

That was a conscious decision, although I'm not a religious person myself. I'm showing this piece in Poland, which is a Catholic country, there are believers even in my family – the fact that it doesn't personally concern me does not mean that it fails to influence the current social and political atmosphere. Besides, I thought it would be interesting to refer to a temple precisely in the Greek context: their culture was open to other religions, other approaches to spirituality. There may have been class divisions and slavery in the polis, but there was never a belief in the superiority of Greek culture over others or racism.

On the other hand, women had no rights and only very few slaves had a chance to gain freedom...

That's true, antiquity is certainly far-removed from our era because of the way it defined the "citizen". Yet, what comes across as fascinating is the civilisation leap achieved in ancient Greece in such a short time and its connection with openness to other cultures. In a way, the developments in the period since the industrial revolution, during the last two centuries, had its counterpart in that ancient era. The emergence of new social roles, the changing approach to marginalised groups and the manner of defining taboos: this is probably why antiquity exerts such strong fascination today.