

**Maja  
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and  
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**Cracks in  
the Planet**

**Geo-ecological Matter in  
Eastern European Art**

Art historians and curators Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes run the Budapest-based Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, a research centre focused on Eastern European art and ecology. Their research explores the history of post-war Eastern European art, environmental art history, and the relationship between contemporary art and ecological thought - all issues that frame the present essay, which looks at how Eastern European artists address the kind of anthropogenic environmental change that today is seen as occurring on a geological scale. The authors examine the potential of contemporary art and the legacy of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde as part of the collective response to global environmental threats.

The art history of Eastern Europe has often been framed in political terms through an overarching emphasis on the way the communist ideology and the socialist experience have affected art practice, and while there have been attempts to reassess art-historical narratives in light of other criteria, such as gender, the environmental dimension in the art history of the region has been regularly overlooked. Nevertheless, environmental concerns have been a significant aspect of Eastern European art since the 1960s and are inseparable from its social and political history, exerting a decisive influence on artistic developments. This chapter considers specifically the engagements of Eastern European artists with anthropogenic environmental changes, which today are perceived to be occurring on a geological scale.

Two sizeable yet rather unremarkable stones were at the centre of an artistic action that took place in the summer of 1971 on the northern outskirts of Prague: the stones were wrapped in netting, hoisted onto the artist's shoulder, and carried along a path through a nondescript green landscape. The neutral and elemental character of the action, in which the mineral fragments of the Earth's crust were simply removed from their current position and transported on the artist's back to another outdoor location, is confirmed by the documentation: six photographs that somberly depict the stages of the action, supplemented by a city map on which the route is marked (figs. 1–2). Carried out by Czech artist Petr Štembera (b. 1945), *Transposition of Stones* focused on the phenomenological apprehension of the natural landscape through astute bodily experience. Eschewing any hidden human-centred social interpretation, as was typical for much of Štembera's work, the action foregrounds direct physical encounters with the natural matter of the world. In this case the artist, who at the time used to describe his practice as ecological, was simply carrying rocks, feeling their weight on his back as he moved through the landscape. Privileging neither his body nor the stones, he merely acknowledged their coexistence; nevertheless, he was actively removing them from their original site.<sup>1</sup>

The unassuming stones, which the artist picked up in a green area of his home town, actually preserve in their structure the deep history of the place, revealing information about past geological epochs – in which, for instance, Prague's location was flooded by three primeval seas, with rock sediments reaching back 570 million years.<sup>2</sup> In fact, according to geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, stones can be understood as “a microcosm of the Universe” in that some of their atoms were part of the stardust produced by the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago, while other atoms derived from super-

1 See Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Central European University Press, New York and Budapest, 2015, p. 208.

2 See “Geological Conditions”, in *Protected Areas of Prague*, ed. Jan Némec, Agency for Nature Conservation and Landscape Protection of the Czech Republic, 1997; available on the City of Prague's environmental information service, ENVIS, [http://envis.prahamesto.cz/rocniky/chruzemi/cr2\\_antx/chu-geol.htm](http://envis.prahamesto.cz/rocniky/chruzemi/cr2_antx/chu-geol.htm) (accessed January 17, 2016).



*fig. 1*

Petr Štembera, *Transposition of Stones*, outskirts of Prague, 1971, detail.

*Courtesy of Petr Štembera.*

novas and travelled “across the vastness of interstellar space, before they arrived in the cloud of dust and gas that was to become our Solar System”.<sup>3</sup> Stones have also endured the millions of years it took for the Earth’s magma to cool and survived climatic variations, waves of extinction, the formation of continents, and the rise and fall of ocean levels, preserving in their layers the drama of planetary history long before humans stepped onto the stage.

From the time our species appeared on the planet, stones have been extracted, transported, and forcibly rearranged through relentless human activity. Furthermore, in recent decades, these interventions into the physical matter and natural processes of the Earth have accelerated to the extent that anthropogenic changes to the environment are now perceived to be happening on a geological scale. Acknowledging these new circumstances, a recent scientific initiative has proposed naming the current geological epoch the Anthropocene, or the Age of Humans. Significantly, rather than being “a mere global ecological crisis”, the onset of the Anthropocene is seen to herald “a new geological regime of existence for the Earth and a new human condition”.<sup>4</sup>

Attentiveness toward rocks, earth, mud, and the surface of the planet, with their deep history and immediate materiality, and an appreciation of the transformative perspective provided by the immensity of geological time, belonged to the shared pool of conceptual props that Eastern European neo-avant-garde artists drew from. This became evident around the watershed year of 1968, when worries about the environmental destruction of the planet were crystallizing, marking the beginning of a global ecological concern that has only intensified over the past half-century.

If we were to analyse the geological materials present in such art practices, what hidden sediments of Eastern European art history would they reveal? To what extent did engagement with planetary dimensions and Earthly matter provide artists with a way to sidestep the social and political circumstances of life under late socialism, and how distinctive a residue has it left in the layers of environmental art history? Additionally, how has the “Great Acceleration” of production, consumption, and technology since 1945, “whose impact on the Earth system is unambiguous”,<sup>5</sup> been reflected in the way contemporary artists have referred to geological processes in their work?

The rapid advance of technological achievement, epitomized by the space travel that enthralled the world at the dawn of the 1970s, opened new vistas for contemplating life on the small blue pearl of Planet Earth.

3 Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Planet in a Pebble: A Journey into Earth’s Deep History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, and New York, 2010, p. 15.

4 Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, “Thinking the Anthropocene”, in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, ed. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, p. 4.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Technological optimism, however, was tempered by new anxieties as it became clear that, at present, “human influence on all disciplines of life is tremendous” while at the same time “enormous energy production in almost all areas has led to the destruction of the natural landscape”. This is how Polish art critic Jerzy Ludwiński (1930–2000) voiced his concern about the ecological predicament of the time when he spoke to a gathering of neo-avant-garde artists at the Wrocław Symposium in 1970, warning that “in the era of flights to the moon, we should pay particular attention to protecting what remains of the Earth”. Interestingly, in his influential paper he also hinted at the link between the newly felt environmental awareness and the spread of dematerialized art practices, emphasizing that in a time of “material and technological gigantism” it is “important to create as little as possible”.<sup>6</sup>

Another member of the Wrocław neo-avant-garde circle was the artist Natalia LL (b. 1937), who articulated her own distinctive approach to the natural environment by problematizing the interactions of geographical phenomena with the human body. In her performative work *Points of Support*, from 1978, she extended her enquiries to a cosmic level, using her own body to reflect the constellations of the night sky onto the surface of the Earth (fig. 3). Through a sequence of body poses she reproduced eighteen celestial formations of the Northern Hemisphere, from Andromeda and Cassiopeia to Orion and Ursa Minor, as points impressed on the ground. The work, which was carried out in the natural environment of the Pieniny National Park in Western Poland, was accompanied by a statement in which Natalia LL addressed the role of art, stressing its ability to access subjective realms and thereby uncover the “underlying principles of reality”. Entering into a communication between two realms – the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of personal experience – while limited by the awareness of her own “physical finitude”, the artist explained: “I live on Earth and take in everything from a specific angle which characterizes my presence in the Universe.” In this action, composed of “ephemeral touches bestowed on the ground”, the artist turns the Earth into a screen on which the boundlessness of the “infinite Cosmos” is projected and made tangible.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than embracing the technological optimism of the period and, for instance, engaging with cybernetics, which was a popular option among Polish artists who were drawn to the idea of “shaping a new, ‘neo-technical’ reality in close collaboration with scientists”,<sup>8</sup> Natalia LL chose a different approach. Her dematerialized work was closer to that of

6 Jerzy Ludwiński, “Wrocław '70”, in *Notes from the Future of Art: Selected Writings of Jerzy Ludwiński*, ed. Magdalena Ziółkowska, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2007, p. 35.

7 Natalia LL, “Points of Support”, in *Permafo 1970–1981*, ed. Anna Markowska, Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Wrocław, 2013, pp. 260–261.

8 Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska, “Art and Cybernetics in the Long Sixties”, in *Cosmos Calling! Art and Science in the Long Sixties*, ed. Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska and Stanisław Welbel, exh. cat., Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2014, pp. 66–67.

the OHO Group in Slovenia, where Milenko Matanović (b. 1947) arranged candles in the Zarica Valley near Kranj so they reflected actual constellations in the night sky (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> OHO's more ontological cosmology, however, was rooted in the countercultural drive to achieve unity with the universe through an exchange of cosmic energies, while Natalia LL was primarily concerned with posing epistemological questions about the degree to which the vastness of the universe may be comprehended.

It was not just artists and critics who were enthused by the age of space travel in the 1960s, but also scientists, including those in the field of geology who could now add another stream to their research – astrogeology. By applying the methods of terrestrial stratigraphy, which studies the succession of rock layers to establish a geological timescale, astrogeologists were gaining new insight into the age of celestial bodies. As a consequence of the space programme, geologists were encouraged “to adopt a fully cosmic perspective on Planet Earth”, in the light of which the history of the Earth was reconceived “as one specific case in a much wider set of divergent planetary histories”.<sup>10</sup> In parallel, artistic practices corresponded to the developments in scientific thinking that made cosmic realms more palpable and increasingly cast doubt on the previously assumed centrality of human beings to planetary history.

The specific conditions of socialist Eastern Europe presented challenges to artists that were as much of an economic and practical character as they were ideological, creating particular institutional settings that also shaped artists' approach to ecological issues. In Poland, artistic engagement with the natural environment was thus framed primarily by the context of regular open-air symposia, which were organized by regional industrial plants in collaboration with local artist associations. These diverse gatherings, which are now acknowledged as having provided “the main form of official art patronage” in Poland during the period of late socialism, covered a wide spectrum of artistic interests.<sup>11</sup> Numerous artworks produced during these events had overtly ecological concerns, which in some cases formed the focus of entire editions, such as the 1974 Osieki Symposium, which took as its theme “Artists and Earth 400 000 km Afar”.<sup>12</sup> Under the actual conditions of socialist Poland in the 1970s, and in contrast to many countries in the Eastern Bloc, it was generally possible to broach environmental problems within the institutional structures of the art world as long as the message did not slip into overtly political territory.

<sup>9</sup> See Fowkes, *The Green Bloc*, pp. 94–95.

<sup>10</sup> Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History: How It Was Discovered and Why It Matters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2014, pp. 289, 291.

<sup>11</sup> Sylwia Serafinowicz, “About the *Concept Art* Exhibition and the *Osieki Plein-Air*”, in *The Wild West: A History of Wrocław's Avant-Garde*, ed. Dorota Monkiewicz, exh. cat., Wrocław Contemporary Museum and Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Wrocław and Warsaw, 2015, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> See *Avant-garde in Plein-Air: Osieki and Łazy 1963–1981*, ed. Ryszard Ziarkiewicz, Muzeum of Koszalin, Koszalin, 2008, pp. 248–259.

The situation was very different in Czechoslovakia, where the arrival of Soviet tanks in 1968 “brought a definitive end to the blossoming” of culture experienced there in the 1960s; in the wave of “normalization” that followed, “harsh censorship” was reintroduced that overturned civic freedoms.<sup>13</sup> As a result, neo-avant-garde art had to relocate to the “seclusion of the private alternative spaces or nature”, with the latter option proving especially attractive “as it was easy to avoid the gaze of secret police agents and informers”.<sup>14</sup> Notably, while artists in Poland were officially invited to do their work in the countryside, in Czechoslovakia they were seeking refuge from surveillance by the authorities. Artists who were interested in issues relating to nature and ecology also faced almost insurmountable problems in gaining access to information about the state of the environment; consequently, they had to rely completely on their own inclinations and personal contacts.

In Slovakia, the artist Rudolf Sikora (b. 1946) was instrumental in introducing discussion about environmental concerns to the Bratislava art scene in the 1970s, both through the meetings he initiated, known as “Tuesdays”, where he and his colleagues, as well as other “unofficial” intellectuals, would debate these issues,<sup>15</sup> and through his own conceptual art practice, which drew strongly from a wide range of Earth sciences, including geography, geology, astronomy, and ecology. Among the influential sources for the artist’s work was also a precious *samizdat* version of a Polish translation of a Club of Rome report on the environment.<sup>16</sup> The study, published under the title *Limits to Growth* in 1972, disconcertingly concluded that if “the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years”.<sup>17</sup> Although the study’s algorithmically processed scientific data may have been partial and its methods of prediction questionable, its daunting conclusion, that the Earth’s capacities were limited, was groundbreaking.

The troubling prospect facing humanity in the new circumstances revealed by science was addressed in a number of Sikora’s works from the early 1970s. For instance, in *Time...Space I*, from 1971, he dealt with the

13 Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art behind the Iron Curtain*, Karolinum Press, Charles University, Prague, 2014, pp. 23–24.

14 Ibid.

15 See Jiří Valoch, “Rudolf Sikora: Conceptual Thinking in Changing Times”, in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, ed. Helena Musilová, National Gallery, Prague, 2006, pp. 7–36.

16 The Club of Rome was founded in April 1968 by a small international group of professionals from the fields of diplomacy, academia, and civil society to discuss the prevalence of short-term thinking and concerns regarding the unlimited consumption of resources in an increasingly interdependent world. For more information, see the club’s website, [www.clubofrome.org](http://www.clubofrome.org) (accessed March 18, 2016).

17 *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club Of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, ed. Donella H. Meadows et al., Earth Island Limited, London, 1972, p. 23.



relation between the temporal and spatial dimensions through six images that, if we follow the white arrows on them, take us on a journey from the universe, to galaxies and the solar system, to Planet Earth and humans. The textual key beneath the images presented scientific facts about the size of universe, the distance between stars, and the age of the Earth, as well as data about the history of life on the planet. With regard to the human element, Sikora noted population numbers in the past and present and predictions for the future. However, there are also entries that elude the usual scientific categories, introducing more experiential notions, such as work, love, and courage, as well as injustice, cruelty, selfishness, war, poverty, fanaticism, and constant conflict among people.<sup>18</sup> These respond to the simultaneous recognition that social justice, economic development, and personal well-being are inseparable from ecological issues and all have a fundamental impact on the environment.

Following this realization, Sikora proclaimed that *Earth Must Not Become a Dead Planet*, a warning that served as the title of a work he made in 1972, in which six elongated graphic sheets were divided into three sections, of which the bottom and top one were the same, while the middle one changed through the succession of the leaves (fig. 5). The bottom sections contained textual elements that read: *sial*, *sima*, *crofesima*, *nifesima*, and *nife* – geological terms that describe the successive layers of the Earth's crust and core. A similar formula is repeated in the upper sections, with the printed words progressing through the layers of the atmosphere, from the lower troposphere to the outer exosphere, which borders space. Thus, Sikora presents a conceptual cross-section of Planet Earth, with its deep history hidden in its geological layers and atmospheric blanket, enabling him to establish the apparently stable temporal-spatial components of the planet's dimensions.

What happens in the middle sections of the prints is of a different order, conveying the story of the development of human civilization as told through the history of architecture. It begins with the megaliths of Stonehenge, after which come the Egyptian pyramids, followed by the ruins of a Greek temple; next in line are Gothic cathedrals, which are succeeded by modern high-rises, some with cranes still attached to them. Tellingly, the final image of the series, rather than continuing the progress of architectural achievements, is a nuclear mushroom cloud. Clearly articulating the danger posed by our own unprecedented development, the work also demonstrates an awareness of the human potential for self-destruction as encapsulated in nuclear technology. A red exclamation mark added to the final print further accentuates the artist's warning about the risky path our civilization is pursuing. On closer inspection, we see that on all the prints the word *sial*, referring to the topmost layer of the Earth's crust, on which human civilization has left its mark, is written in a different shade to the rest, while in the final print the colour variation also applies to the first

18 See Fowkes, *The Green Bloc*, pp. 177–179.

layer of the atmosphere. By depicting the human-produced changes to the geological and atmospheric layers of Earth, Sikora gives visual form to the profound idea that humans have usurped natural processes to become geological agents. Some thirty years later, geologists have come to a similar conclusion.

Living and working in Bratislava in the normalization era, Sikora refused to be bound by the very specific social and political circumstances, attuning his thinking instead to the vaster coordinates of time and space. Cosmic escapism, a well-known phenomenon in the Slovak art scene of the 1970s,<sup>19</sup> was of a different nature in Sikora's work, however, since although he pointed to the incongruity between thinking on a cosmic scale and the pettiness of the normalization system, he remained firmly within a scientific frame of reference. Convincingly arguing that "the damage to ecological balance would affect the entire world" because "devastation knows no borders",<sup>20</sup> he implicitly commented on the fact that forcibly keeping the Iron Curtain running across the European continent was not going to change this prospect.

The Slovene artist Marko Pogačnik (b. 1944) also developed his practice in the upswing of conceptual art, political protest, countercultural experiment, and global ecology that shook the world around 1968. As one of the core members of OHO,<sup>21</sup> he participated in many of the group's investigations into natural processes and states of consciousness, and he was also one of the initiators of the Šempas Family commune in the Slovene countryside that was set up in the early 1970s. Still based there, Pogačnik has dealt in his later work primarily with the relationship between "the visible (materialised) and the invisible (vital energy, emotional, and spiritual) dimensions of space".<sup>22</sup>

Using the insights of geomancy, a divining discipline that investigates the complex structure of energy flows that permeate the entire Earth, Pogačnik devised a method to translate the alternative healing technique of acupuncture into an artistic-ecological practice directed toward remedying the troubles of the planet itself. This large-scale procedure, which he refers to as *lithopuncture*, is based on the principle that applying pressure to particular spots on the ground – using stone pillars instead of needles – elicits a change in energy in sites that, for example, have experienced war-

19 See Daniel Grūn, "Der Kosmos der slowakischen Neoavantgarde zwischen Utopie, Fiktion und Politik", in *Crossing 68/89: Grenzüberschreitungen und Schnittpunkte zwischen den Umbrüchen*, ed. Jürgen Danyel et al., Metropol, Berlin, 2008, pp. 136–155.

20 Rudolf Sikora, "Biographical Notes", in *Rudolf Sikora: Against Myself*, pp. 274–276 (see n. 15).

21 The other members of the OHO group were David Nez, Milenko Matanović, and Andraž Šalamun. See *OHO: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., 2nd ed., Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, and Revolver, Frankfurt am Main, 2007; the OHO retrospective, at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana in 1994, was curated by Igor Zabel.

22 Marko Pogačnik, "Back to Art – Art Forward", in *Marko Pogačnik: The Art of Life – The Life of Art*, ed. Igor Španjol, exh. cat., Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2012, pp. 565–567.

time trauma or environmental violence.<sup>23</sup> The stones are carved with visual messages that take the form either of kinesiograms, which might be understood as ornamental depictions of the energy recordings of a certain place, or cosmograms, more symbolically coded pictograms that deal with particular issues, such as world peace, bridging the East–West divide, or the treatment of animals. Over the last thirty years, Pogačnik has installed such healing stones at dozens of natural sites across the world (figs. 6–7), including Tamera, Portugal (*Sociogram*, 2004–2006), Fuerteventura in the Canary Islands (*Atlantis*, 2007), and Louisville, Kentucky (*28 Aspects of the Divine Presence on Earth*, 2008).

Comparing his works to Neolithic stone circles, Pogačnik makes a significant distinction between these contemporary alignments and structures like Stonehenge, which were erected at a time “when the coexistence between Gaia consciousness, nature and human culture was not distorted”.<sup>24</sup> Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess of the Earth, has also lent her name to the hypothesis proposed by the British scientist James Lovelock, which posits a self-regulating system consisting of the planet’s biosphere and physical components that keeps the Earth’s climatic and biochemical conditions in a state of balance. In the original version of Lovelock’s theory, Gaia appeared as a benevolent living organism, a “vast being who ... has the power to maintain our planet as a fit and comfortable habitat for life”.<sup>25</sup> However, as climate change has turned the world into an increasingly unpredictable place, Gaia has revealed a darker side, encapsulated also by the title of Lovelock’s more pessimistic follow-up, *The Revenge of Gaia*.<sup>26</sup> Pogačnik’s thinking about Gaia consciousness has also evolved in ways corresponding to the changing scientific and theoretical interpretations of Gaia, as the artist has detected “a series of crucial changes in the vital energy and spiritual levels of the space of the Earth” since the late 1990s, in the wake of the rapidly deteriorating global environmental situation.<sup>27</sup>

In Pogačnik’s practice, rocks are not just the inanimate matter of the planetary crust but are seen as conductors of the cosmic energies that reverberate through the planet. They serve as conduits for communication with the immaterial phenomena of the Earth – on the one hand, informing the planet “about the reawakening human awareness”, the consequence of realizing that we are at a tipping point, and on the other, sending out the message to people that we need to care for the invisible dimensions of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Marko Pogačnik, “Geopuncture Circles”, on the artist’s website, [http://www.markopogacnik.com/?page\\_id=888](http://www.markopogacnik.com/?page_id=888) (accessed January 14, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 1; originally published in 1979.

<sup>26</sup> James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth Is Fighting Back – and How We Can Still Save Humanity*, Allen Lane, London, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Pogačnik, “Back to Art – Art Forward”, p. 67.

Earth, not just its material properties.<sup>28</sup> It is this kind of “profound ecology”, which takes into account both the spiritual domain of the Earth’s body and human consciousness, that constitutes the new “geoculture”. In the artist’s view, by adopting such a holistic geocultural position we are able to “transform our civilization into a culture of peace and coexistence between nations, and also between humankind and the worlds of nature and the Earth”.<sup>29</sup>

Another proposal for a unified world, solidarity among peoples, empathy for other species, and an environmentally sustainable way of life is put forward in the multilayered installation *Pangaea: Visual Aid for Historical Consciousness* (2011), by the Hungarian artist duo Tamás Kaszás (b. 1976) and Anikó Loránt (b. 1977), who work together as the Ex-Artists Collective. Their approach, however, differs from Pogačnik’s insistence on the communion of planetary beings, as their motivation lies rather in finding alternatives to the prevailing economic system, which is ultimately responsible for bringing the world to the verge of ecological disaster. As others have pointed out, to challenge the dominance of the “fundamental, growth-based, profit-seeking logic of capitalism” and its effects on the planet means having the “audacity to think differently and conceive of alternative futures”.<sup>30</sup> In that sense, instead of proposing general political programmes and attempts to reform the entire system, the artists prefer to explore the potential of small-scale solutions that operate on the level of the individual, family, or collective and offer the possibility of more autonomous and creative ways of living in the shadow of the industrial-technological paradigm.

As the duo’s name implies – and not unlike OHO in the early 1970s – the Ex-Artists Collective strive to one day achieve the conditions for “an art practice without institutional mediation” that is based on a self-sustaining life in proximity to nature.<sup>31</sup> Indicative of their environmentally sensitive approach, meanwhile, is the practice of interlinking, rearranging and recycling materials from their previous works in new configurations. This was the case too with their *Pangaea* installation (fig. 8), which consisted of a wooden structure with bulletin boards and shelves on which old and new drawings, objects, and posters were arranged in four thematic sections: *Symbol Rehab*, *Agro-culture*, *Collapsism*, and *As We Live It*.<sup>32</sup> The selected zones reveal the artists’ interests in collecting evidence of previous social struggles to improve the world, their special sensitivity toward indigenous communities and folk culture, and, as in the poster “After Oil”, their understanding that the global petro-capitalist system is on the verge

28 Ibid., p. 71.

29 Ibid., p. 74.

30 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2014, p. 89.

31 Maja and Reuben Fowkes, “Tamás Kaszás’s Art Laboratory: Anticipating Collapse, Practicing Survival”, *Ars Hungarica*, no. 3, December 2013, p. 112.

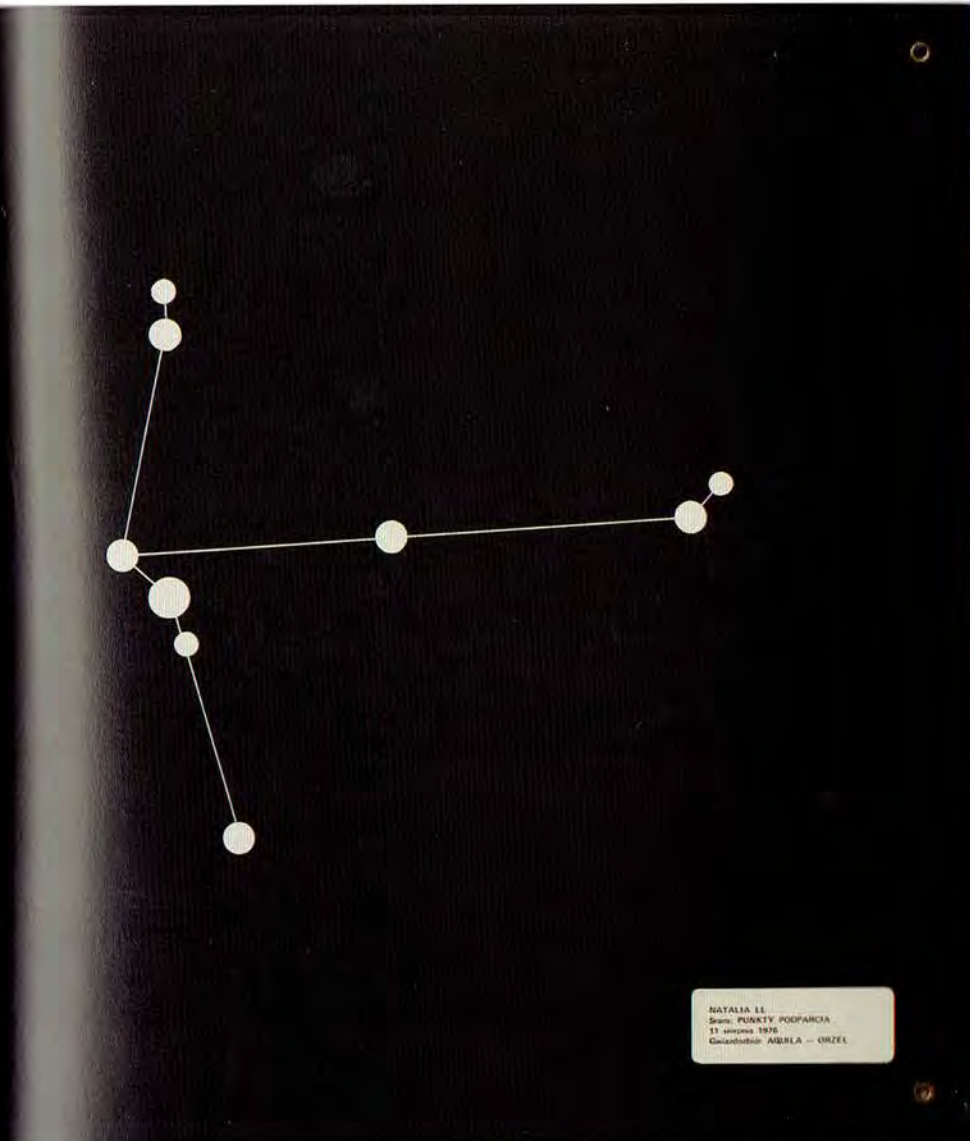
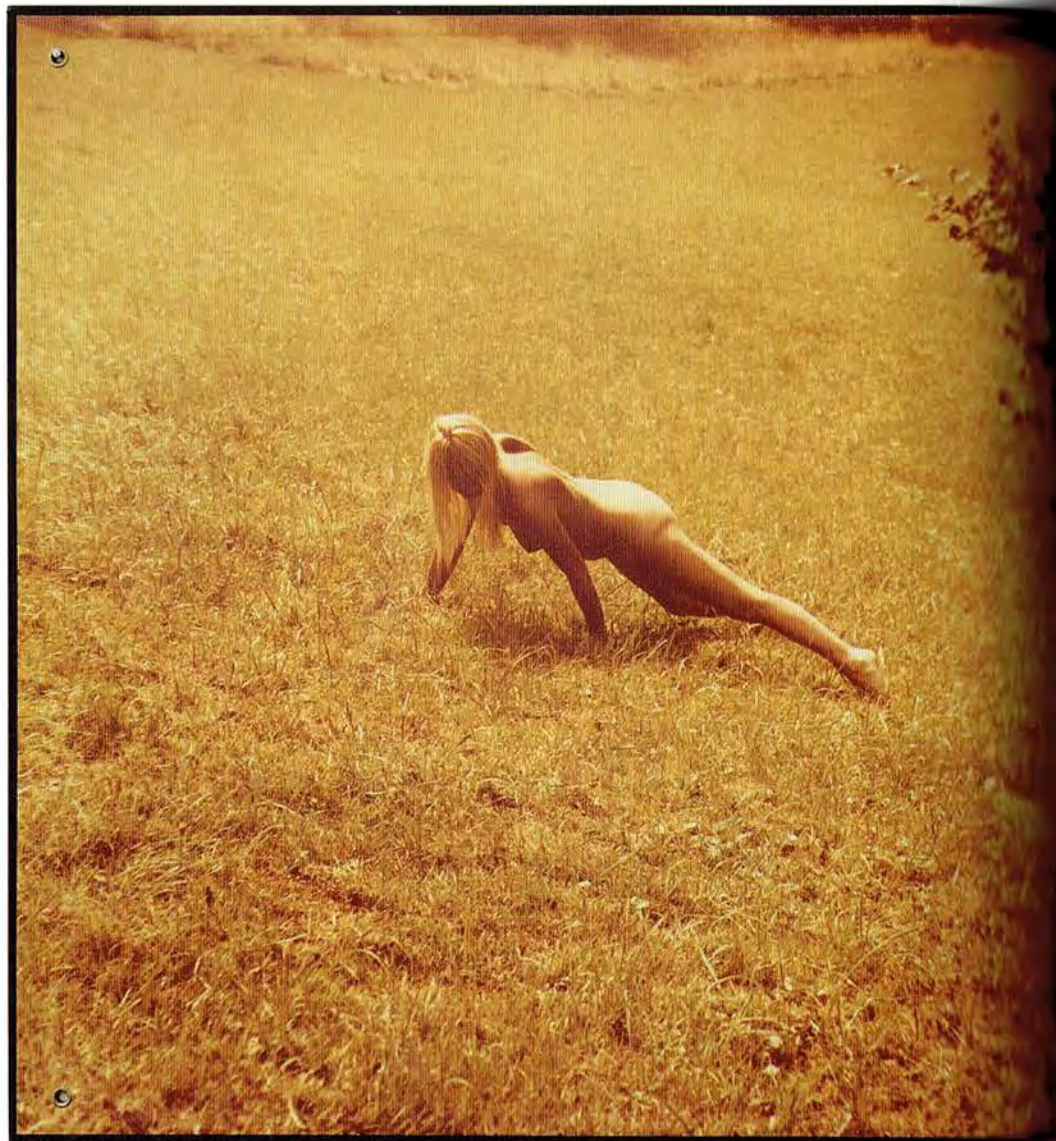
32 See Tamás Kaszás, *Visual Aid*, Kisterem, Budapest, 2013.



fig. 2

Petr Štembera, *Transposition of Stones*, outskirts of Prague, 1971.

*Courtesy of Petr Štembera.*



NATALIA LL  
Seria: PUNKTY PODPARCIA  
13 sierpnia 1978  
Genezy: ABELA - ORZEŁ

fig. 3

Natalia LL, *Points of Support: Aquila Constellation*, 1978.

Courtesy of Natalia LL and Lokal 30 Gallery, Warsaw.

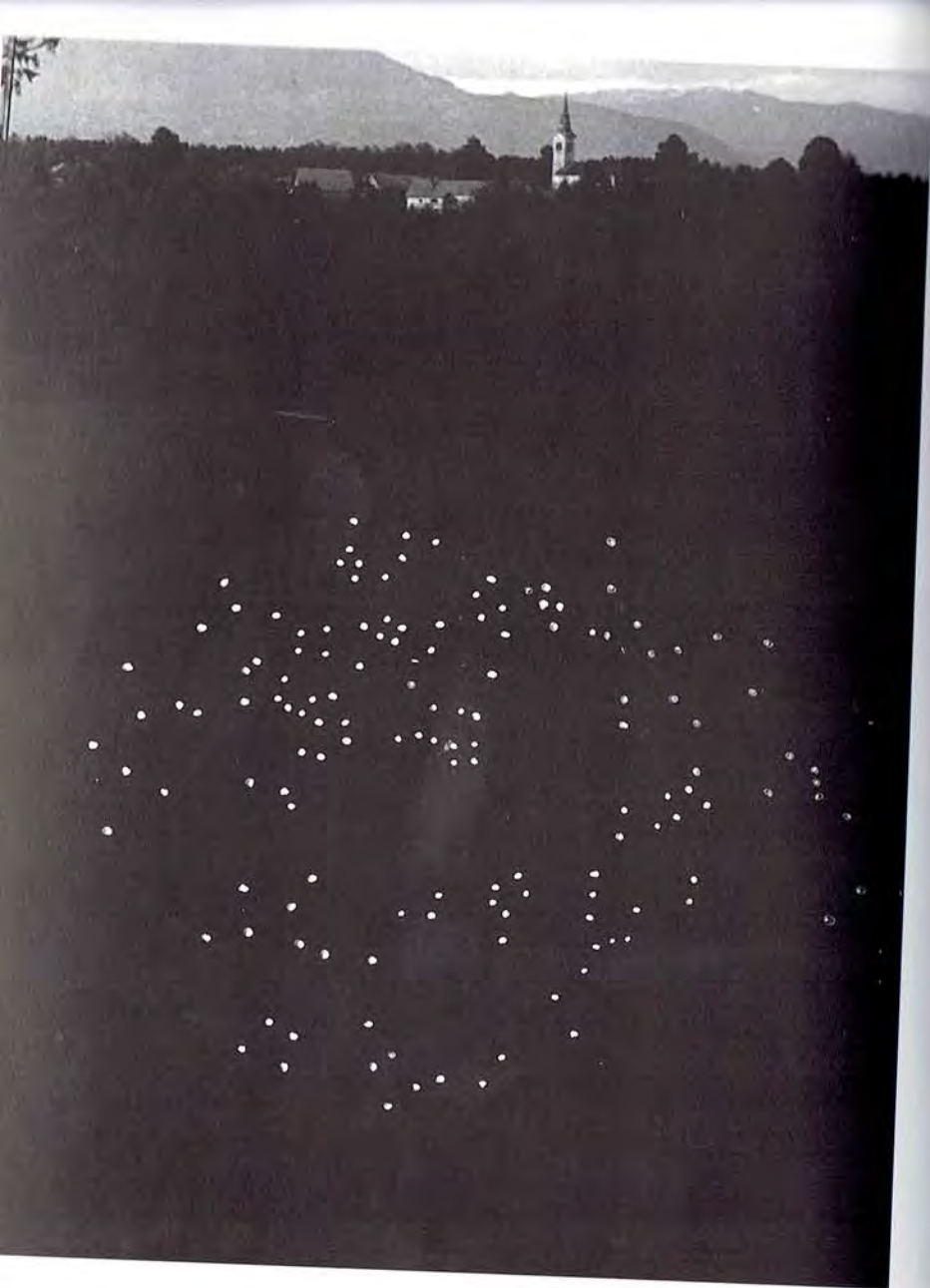


fig. 4

Milenko Matanović / OHO, *The Constellation of Candles in the Field Corresponds to the Constellation of the Stars in the Sky*, Zarica Valley near Kranj, Slovenia, April 30, 1970.

Courtesy of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

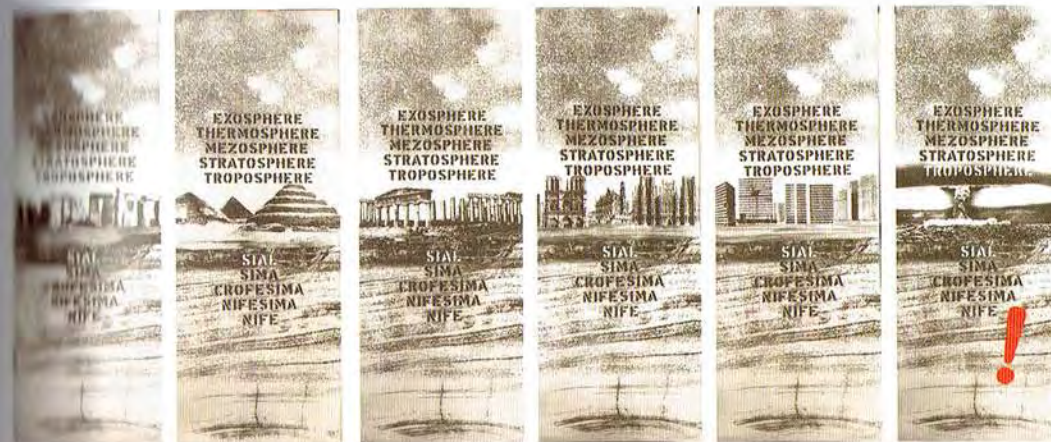


fig. 5

Rudolf Sikora, *The Earth Should Not Become a Dead Planet*, 1972.

Courtesy of Rudolf Sikora.



*fig. 6*

Marko Pogačnik, *Geopuncture Circle*, Tamera, Portugal, 2006.

*Courtesy of Marko Pogačnik.*



*fig. 7*

Marko Pogačnik and VITAAA Association, *Peace Point*,  
geopuncture circle, BTC City, Ljubljana, 2009.

*Photo by Bojan Breclj.*





*fig. 8*

Tamás Kaszás and Anikó Loránt (Ex-Artists Collective),  
*Pangaea: Visual Aid for Historical Consciousness*, 2011.

*Courtesy of Tamás Kaszás.*

of breakdown; finally, the last section addresses the question of personal responsibility and points to the transformative potential that lies in acquiring practical skills and shared creativity in everyday life.

One of the recurring motifs in Kaszás and Loránt's work is the figure of the peasant, to whom they assign an affirmative role as a revolutionary force by recalling radical peasant uprisings throughout history. Their choice of the peasant over the industrial worker demonstrates a critical attitude to the political utopia of socialism, which was ultimately based on the economic model of industrial growth. By repurposing agro-utopian imagery they additionally comment on the issue of industrial agriculture and unsustainable food production in today's globalized world, in which the trio of genetically modified foods, herbicides, and artificial fertilizers are degrading the topmost layer of the Earth's crust. Indeed, it has been observed that the scale of the "contemporary patterns of soil degradation, expressed through both net nutrient loss and soil erosion, make it one of the defining environmental characteristics of the Anthropocene".<sup>33</sup> Opposing intensive, chemical-based agriculture, the Ex-Artists Collective advocate small-scale gardening based on the principles of permaculture, which also acts as a source of social and ecological empowerment.<sup>34</sup>

The *Pangaea* installation not only makes references that fall within the realm of geology – such as to the Earth's top layer of fertile soil and deeper-lying oil deposits – but the work's very title, accentuated by the banners "Pangaea United" and "We are all from Pangaea", which flank the entrances to the installation, is also borrowed from the discipline. Literally meaning "all-earth", the term Pangaea is used in geology to refer to the last supercontinent, which existed 200 million years ago, when all of today's continents formed one enormous land mass surrounded by a single ocean. Scientific advances enabling the construction of "increasingly plausible global maps of different geological periods", as in the case of Pangaea, reinforce the sense that the "Earth's history has been highly contingent throughout and therefore utterly unpredictable".<sup>35</sup> Conceiving *Pangaea* as a "visual aid", the artists point to the longevity of our planet's geological history and the accelerated processes of today's globalized world and thus put the current dominance of humans into perspective. The transformative power of natural matter that once formed the world without borders also stands as a powerful metaphor for the interdependence of "all-earth", erasing geopolitical rivalries and the cultural and ethnic polarities of a world faced with the planetary consequences of the ecological crisis.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Whitehead, *Environmental Transformations: A Geography of the Anthropocene*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, and New York, 2014, p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> Tamás Kaszás, "The Artist as Farmer", *Lumen Station: Reap and Sow*, no. 3, special issue, ed. Virág Major, Lumen Photography Foundation, Budapest and Berlin, 2015, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History*, p. 260.

At first glance, the deep history of the Earth allowed Eastern European artists – both those who worked during the long period of late socialism and those caught up in the maelstrom of capitalist globalization – to make a statement about the transitory character of political history. Equally, the cosmological perspective that they regularly brought into play helped illustrate the absurdity and ultimate insignificance of the geopolitical divides on the planet. On closer inspection, the strata of art history reveal the complexity of artistic engagements with the materiality of the planet. No matter how they approached the issue, whether through phenomenological, epistemological, scientific, transcendental, or socially critical lenses, all these artists chose to direct attention to specific aspects of the parallel existence of the human and planetary realms, as manifest both in their physical actuality and in less tangible dimensions.

Geology, however, does not figure in their work simply to indicate the vastness of non-human time and space; it also serves as a marker of the magnitude of the current ecological crisis. Visualizing the proportions of human interventions in the geological matter of the Earth, the artists commented on humanity's unprecedented interference in natural processes and the ominous consequences both for the planet and its inhabitants. In the geologic present of the Anthropocene, it is clear that there is no turning back the clock, but rather, as the artists discussed here have proposed, we should either concentrate on small steps as an antidote to the effects of the merciless economic system or enter into a sincere conversation with the Earth about renewing the cosmic contract on more equitable terms. A debate of cosmo-political proportions about the future of the planet would necessarily have to include the whole of humanity, not just the global elite, and extend as well to non-human actors from animals and plants to rocks, rivers, and the elemental materiality of the Earth. In the rekindling and scaling up of the planetary imagination, the shaping of a collective response to the environmental fracturing of the world and the articulation of an unprecedented global project to challenge the dominant extractivist model, the potential of contemporary art and the legacy of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde are only just beginning to be understood.