

START UP: APART COLLECTIVE

SURFACE DEPRESSION AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW HABITATS

2 October – 17 November 2019

Prague City Gallery

Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace

Karlova 2, Prague 1

Open every day except Monday, from 10 am to 6 pm

Since the 1970s, our world seems to undergo regular periods of crisis followed by renewed expansion. With the end of industrial modernism based on constant growth – the result of the first economic and environmental collapses – we also see the end of clear visions of the affluent goal of our lives. This era is also marked by the birth of new economic behavior among the world's population associated with the libidinal desire for goods and constant technological progress. In its exhibition titled *Surface Depression and the Emergence of New Habitats*, the Slovak art collective *Apart* (Ema Hesterová, Denis Kozerawski, Chiara Rendeková, Peter Sit, Andrej Žabkay) takes a look at our consciousness at a time of environmental tragedy.

In the opening scenes of the film *The Most Beautiful Catastrophe*, we see František Gajdoš's 1960 fresco decorating the hall of Bratislava's main train station, one of several possible keys to understanding a socialist utopia that is thoroughly international, anti-racist, peaceful, scientific, progressive, and unifying. Unfortunately, this great utopian dream is confronted by the fragmentation of contemporary society and by the lack of any vision for the future that we might relate to.

The artists build the rest of the film, situated in the present day in the central Slovakian town of Nováky, a town with a strong mining history, on the ruins of this great utopian worldview. After the painful end of the industrial use of the landscape, the undermined areas saw the emergence of wetlands whose geological composition gave rise to unique ecosystems. However, the landscape's self-regulatory process of returning to its original state was disturbed by the pumping of water from the still operational mine, thus destroying all animal life. Similarly in the Czech Republic, the government decided at a ministerial meeting in Ústí nad Labem in 2015 to extend the limits for brown-coal mining in the region, which sent any notions of a sustainable utopia back to the 19th century, though under the conditions of today's turbo-market economics of the Anthropocene.

As a complementary symbol for the present day, the group uses empty cans of energy drinks as vessels for burning frankincense – on the one hand, a symbol of the yearning for a dynamic progress that long ago reached its limits; on the other, an ancient symbol of religious ritual. By the same logic, frankincense is today, based on recent studies of the resin from which it is produced, considered an antidepressant substance capable of reducing anxiety. One important element in the exhibition is precisely this conflict between the yearning for unstoppable technological progress, as represented by the smoke from the censers, and the effect of the incense, which is to suppress these desires.

If we were to explore personal strategies of how to relate to environmental issues, we would probably find that it is not enough to recycle, that the question of the environment is political and global in nature, and that the neo-liberal concept of the individual as an autonomous and independent being has failed. Despite the relevance of great historical utopias, the urgency of today's problems requires a more realistic approach that can be realized gradually, in small measures and in the minds of people, so that we may move towards a future that, instead of aiming for a clear objective, takes on a foggier and merely intuited form.

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