

G E O R G K A R G L B O X

PRESS INFORMATION

AGNIESZKA POLSKA

Voices, Birds, Stone Tools.

Opening: May 2nd, 2019, 6 pm – 9 pm

On view: May 3rd – June 15, 2019

“In the dark times, will there also be singing?

Yes, there will be singing.

About the dark times.”

(Motto, Bertold Brecht)

In dark times, can there be poetry? In the late ‘30s, Bertolt Brecht wrote a short poem called ‘Motto’ in which he reflects on the possibility of writing poetry amid the deadly forces that swept Europe between the two world wars. In the few lines that compose the poem, Brecht works through his dilemma as lyric poet, showing us what the poet wants to write about, and then how these human and ordinary things are annihilated by fascism. In such situation, as Brecht himself comments, poetry becomes impossible. Yet, while acknowledging the impossibility of poetry, Brecht insists on its necessity, a need denied by the overwhelming terrors of the approaching World War. The poem is a maxim, a note to the self, and a reminder that silence is not an option. Brecht believed in the necessity of combining literary creativity with political commitment. When war, violence, and oppression threaten to render everyone and everything mute, poetry that bears witness to its times becomes a form of resistance against death and destruction. And so, Brecht’s poem answers the question by saying, “Yes, there will be singing.”

The ethical dilemma the lyric poet works through in the lines of Motto feels all the more relevant today in these times of profound crisis – economic, social, ecological, environmental, existential, and political. What can art do? How do artists, poets, writers speak of and back to the present? Like Brecht’s poem, Agnieszka Polska’s work is an exploration of the relation between art and politics, between artistic agency and the larger socio-political context which influences the production of art. Her work asks questions about the possibility of poetic actions and social transformation through art and culture, in times of political turmoil and social unrest. However, unlike Brecht, her engagement with art and politics is not strictly speaking militant; and her work doesn’t offer political truths or revolutionary solutions. The protagonists of her video-works are often stuck between a desire for action and its impossible fulfillment; between individualism and a love for others that can lead to significant transformations; between clarity and confusion, optimism and desperation. They exist in a state of existential vulnerability, exposed to the contradictions that animate our present. And they urge us to act.

In the video ‘Dark Times’ (2017), the central piece of the exhibition ‘Voices, Birds, Stone Tools’ at Georg Kargl BOX, floating in a dark liquid, a disembodied mouth repeats a slightly modified version of Brecht’s poem which enacts a refusal of singing the dark times. The mouth exhorts us to “stop singing about the dark times and go.” Like a mantra, the voice repeats the same line over and again. Stop singing and go. Stop and go. But where to it’s hard to say, as we are stuck, suspended in a present without time facing a future unknown, while history seems to repeat itself, and nations rise and fall. It’s hard thus not to feel a sense of frustration and impotence vis-à-vis a reality that continuously crashes our hopes, turning dreams into nightmares, making impossible to envision existence beyond the violence of a present in disarray. In this respect, Polska’s video

GEORG KARGL BOX

is a call to act that is also an investigation of precarious forms of life and of our collective psyche in these uncertain times.

A sense of stasis seems to reign in a world supposedly moving and transforming at high speed. Nothing seems to really change, not even the urge with which the voice urges us to do something. In the print *Dream* (2017), a sharpened black stone like those used as tools in the stone-age, blocks the vision, impeding the eye to look back to the viewer. Yet, the stone does not simply and only obstruct vision. What we see foregrounded is the stone, that appears as the central element of the image. The artist seems to ask us to focus our attention on the black stone which is here depicted like those tools and weapons, means of survival fashioned into knives, scrapers, spear blades, hand axes and used by humans for hunting, for gathering food and in the production of clothing and shelters. The history of human kind is a history of violence and fierce resistance; of catastrophes, but also of survival. Despite the impossibility to imagine forms of life beyond capitalism, *Polska* reminds us that the possibility of action and transformation is always on the horizon. And like an omen, the enigmatic eyes of the black birds in the print *Birds* (2018), which shows the profiles of two black birds looking in opposite directions, seems to announce changes. We can only guess what these changes will bring. And yet, the impossibility to know should not prevent from embracing the openness of what we don't know, and experimenting with the possibilities of new forms of sociality immersed in refusal and subversive songs.

In the print *We Don't* (2017), juxtaposed to and in the middle of what looks like an exploded version of a constructivist landscape painting, is the sentence, "We don't share the same temporality." No. This is not the time in which Brecht wrote his poem, and although the political and social crisis investing Europe today bears some resemblances to that period, this is neither time for despair and resignation nor for the dream of messianic redemption. The multiplicity of temporalities that we inhabit has collapsed given concepts of time and space, opening a space for action, one in which art can play a part in making the impossible become less so.

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