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**ATLAS
OF MOOD
EARNI
TYP**

THE 20TH
AND 21ST
ART COLLECTION
EXERCISES

Modernity. An era whose beginnings some trace back to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, progress, and emancipation, others to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism. At the same time, it is a civilizational construct that is contested as a source and product of imperial conquests and the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment. A construct whose end has been heralded many times, but which continues to define the reality around us: culture, models of scientific knowledge, social structures, patterns of political activity, economic mechanisms, and our notions of ourselves. If we want to understand the contemporary world, we must keep returning to modernity. This exhibition of works from the collection of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź invites the viewer to embark on such an intellectual journey. We have called it an “Atlas,” for it is a collection of maps charting a topography of modernity—a phenomenon whose geographical and chronological boundaries remain fluid and vague.

The first iteration of the Atlas was an invitation to travel down winding paths from the sources of the modern world to the present day. The current one encourages the viewer to explore independently and to exercise the discovery of new meanings, emotions, and experiences on this path. Its point of reference is a vision of a plurality of modernities predicated on different traditions, sensibilities, and ideas, modernities developed in both a ground-up and a top-down manner, originating in Europe and elsewhere.

In the place where the Atlas is presented—post-industrial halls converted into exhibition spaces—two modern histories meet: the avant-garde beginnings of the Muzeum Sztuki collection and the industrial capitalism that gave birth to the city of Łódź. An additional context is provided by the immediate vicinity: a shopping and entertainment center built on the remnants of a former textile factory complex. Thus situated on the map of modernity, Muzeum Sztuki has again become a space to exercise and test its underlying concepts.

THE MUSEUM

The most general definition of the museum says it is a place where objects belonging to mankind's natural and cultural heritage are collected and protected. But since the nineteenth century, the museum's foremost mission has been to organize our knowledge of the world. This is not an innocent activity; the classifications and distinctions adopted by museums have served to confirm and justify the world order that they underpin. For example, by classifying the achievements of non-European peoples as "primitive art," museums justified a sense of the superiority of European civilization and its right to reign over "less developed" cultures. Museum exhibitions presenting the development of modern art as seen from the perspective of Paris or New York played a similar role—they reinforced an image of the West as a center and reaffirmed its global hegemony.

Igor Krenz's work takes a metaphorical and ironic look at efforts to organize artistic reality. It is not so much a critique as a manifestation of humility, in view of the fact that structures are by no means eternal or immutable. We ought to renew our attempts to establish them, because without organizing knowledge it is difficult to navigate the world. In doing so, however, one should remain aware that they are merely a description of the world, rather than the world itself.

The photograph displayed vis-à-vis the work by Igor Krenz shows a view of the first exhibition of the a.r. group's collection of avant-garde art at what would eventually become Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. The works in the exhibition are not arranged according to any recognized organizational system. Is it pure chaos? Or perhaps a harbinger of a new, avant-garde organizing idea?

AUTONOMY

Independence is of great importance to modernity, whether of nations, various people, science, or art. Sovereignty and independence—in other words, autonomy—are special values in modern art. Society, which from day to day is focused on achieving concrete and quantifiable aims, makes an exception for art. Art need not be productive—it can remain in a space seemingly detached from life. This does not mean it turns its back on the everyday.

It is autonomy that guarantees new ways of approaching development, outside of politics and economics. It is also autonomy that allowed artists like Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński to use art and its strategies to test solutions that might later serve to bring about changes in city planning, architecture, and the design of new social structures.

CAPITAL

According to Karl Marx, capital is the process of producing added value by the production of goods. It must constantly grow, and to this end, all social relations are subordinated to the development of capitalism. The capitalist factory produces more than commodities. As the driving force of the modern world, it also produces social classes, the family structure, entertainment, and culture. Contemporary, technologically refined capitalism has absorbed growing spheres of life and the world. Education, intellect, and cultural skills, shaped and gathered by everyone in or outside of the workplace, even one's network of friends and acquaintances, are used for profit. And the arduous, physical, repetitive work in industry that was widespread in nineteenth-century Europe was shipped abroad. Contemporary artists have observed capitalism closely. They have seen it as a chance for the progress of civilization, but have also critiqued the exploitation of workers. Art itself, on the one hand, became an object of market speculation, and on the other tried to propose alternative models of social and economic relations, liberated from commodification.

PROGRESS

For many decades, progress in various fields, such as technology or medicine, allowed people to believe in a better future. In the interwar period especially, there was a conviction that a rational approach to reality could deal with poverty and disease, ushering in order and structure. After the war, in the period of outer space exploration and the boom in Western countries, societies went through a phase of fascination for technological progress and the capabilities it promised. In our day, it is difficult to speak of progress without some skepticism. World War II proved many optimistic visions to be a fiasco. The systemic violence that spread in colonized countries under the guise of a “civilizing mission” was confronted. Presently, in the context of our growing environmental crisis, we might wonder if the consequences of the industrial and information revolutions will have catastrophic results, not only for ecosystem, but for the human species as well.

CITY

Before the modern epoch, art was not accessible to all. If bought by aristocrats, it graced the manors of its patrons. If created in praise of God, it stayed within the walls of abbeys and churches. It was modernity that literally brought art out into the streets. All urban inhabitants had access to art, whether in special institutions or in the visual language of advertising. The city became the main arena of modern life, the site of the key changes in civilization over the past two centuries. The rapid development of the metropolis became a subject for art. Art also made city-dwellers aware that public space was common property. Artists often carried out precursors of urban demonstrations.

MACHINE

Modern artists saw the machine as a symbol of human creative power. It seduced them as a new aesthetic ideal in which functionalism would replace the canons of beauty. The avant-gardists used a whole arsenal of “mechanical” tactics: simplified forms, mathematical compositions, and industrial technologies and materials. Not all the artists of the historical avant-garde shared this optimism. The machine was also seen as dehumanizing the world, in which efficiency was becoming the priority. From this perspective, the automation of life led to social atomization and the alienation of individuals. In the postwar era, the machine continued to be seen as a model for a functioning society. Its faultless operations, enhanced by the achievements of cybernetics, ensured the effective regulation of the life of the masses. Yet not all artists saw the development of technology as a sign of progress. With the growing environmental crisis, some neo-avant-garde artists began to take a skeptical approach toward the concept of a collective that functioned like a well-oiled machine. They posited drawing from intuition-based knowledge and sought solutions based on forms of communal life.

EXPERIMENT

Every scientific experiment abides by rules and has to take place in carefully controlled conditions. An experiment in art has no such restrictions—here the work of the imagination strays beyond all imposed categories.

Experimentation is part of a progress-based modernity, and also of avant-garde art, which goes beyond the well-worn formulae, models, and traditions. Artists make innovative arrangements of spaces and surfaces, they explore photography, sound, and moving images. The results of their work are also seen in everyday life. Avant-garde ways of building a picture have become a permanent part of graphic design, experiments tied to abstract geometry have yielded new forms of architecture and design, and their film experiments have crossed into mass culture. An experiment in art can also have broader implications: it can suggest new forms of social coexistence or ways of seeing, listening to, and understanding the world that surrounds us.

PROPAGANDA

Propaganda imposes views and behavior on society. It often involves intellectual and emotional manipulation, distortion of facts, and the censorship of inconvenient content. Propaganda reinforces stereotypes. It constructs enemies to mock or demonize them. It shapes an atmosphere of peril around personal and communal liberty. Modern propaganda largely draws from methods used in art. Some artists consciously became involved in politics, and some in avant-garde techniques like photomontage, which merged with the language of propaganda for good. Yet traditional painting turned out to be an equally effective tool of ideological indoctrination, as proved by works in the spirit of Socialist Realism. In modernity it has been very difficult to break free of propaganda, especially when it promises a better tomorrow and success. This is why art, especially when it appeals to personal experience, can be the best antidote to indoctrination. It exposes the simplicity of these associations and lets us take a step back from the imposed image of the world.

THE NORM

Beginning in childhood, which we spend in pink or blue pajamas, depending on our gender, norms determine every aspect of our lives. There are norms to define the proper proportion of weight to height, norms for blood count and blood pressure. There are rules for Polish grammar, norms of behavior, rules for gender roles, sexual orientation, class and ethnic background, social status... Norms are ubiquitous, so it should come as no surprise that they have been a subject in art. Some artists reveal their oppressive nature, disciplining the body, interpersonal relations, and everyday behavior. Others have been interested in exploring the most basic norms that organize reality (structures, schemata), or the reverse, constructing norms through art to define and harmonize social relationships outside of art.

I

Every adult citizen of Poland has a personal ID, a document that unambiguously identifies them. In legal regulations there is no room for doubt about the “I,” but modern and contemporary art occupy a different sphere. In the modern epoch especially, thinkers and artists began critically examining the nature of the “I.” In the seventeenth century, Descartes saw the capacity to think as the essence of the subject. The “I” was the mind. In this way, human physicality was shunted into the background for many centuries. In art, the body appeared only as a metaphor for abstract ideas or as an object of erotic fascination. As an object, not a subject. It was left to the twentieth century to restore the body, showing our “I” to be a spiritual/physical whole. The body lets us build links with our surroundings, to sense and act. This topic has particularly been explored by female artists, who put physicality on display, to tell an intimate tale of female identity and its ties to the experience of the body. Others have gone still further, creating art in which the body as part of the structure of the work enters into a relationship with the body of the viewer.

EMANCIPATION

Although European modernity is responsible for conquests, colonialism, and exploitation, it has also been a source of many emancipation processes. Modernity has been a driving force behind visions and ideas that say everyone deserves equal rights and people should have the power to change the world. This epoch began processes that gave voice to groups who had never before had the chance to speak out: religious minorities, slaves, women, and workers. This struggle is not over. Its aim continues to be to combat discrimination based on skin color, sexuality, age, and health, and to give equal access to education, pay, and careers. The Emancipation chapter presents the work of artists who have taken part in this struggle, and whose creative biographies are testimonies to discriminated groups acquiring agency.

REVOLUTION

The twentieth century was an age of revolution in Europe. The revolutionary ideas of socialism stoked the imaginations of leftist artists across Europe. The aim was to link slogans of social revolution with the tendency to experiment in forms of art. Avant-garde art was to take part in building a new society and its infrastructure. After the war, owing to the shift in the balance of powers in Europe, the eastern part, including Poland, found itself in the grip of Soviet totalitarianism. A revolution destroys the old system, building new rules on its ashes, often as hegemonic as the ones that came before. Yet in the works of postwar artists, a new way of thinking is visible. The revolution is initiated by individuals aware of the need for change, for social emancipation. The revolution need not be tied to acts of destruction; it occurs in everyday life, reaching into the private sphere. For these artists, revolution is primarily creative, it can be joyous, and even have an element of tenderness. As Joseph Beuys put it: "The revolution is us."

TRADITION

Tradition is created by ideas and values that members of a community deem important. It allows societies to survive and develop, building its identity and bonds. This is why, for instance, avant-garde Jewish artists tied to Jung Idysz tried to find a place for their Yiddish roots and culture in the international language of modern art. Tradition can be a source of support against the destructive effects of capitalism, modernization, and globalization processes (the objectification of human relations, the alienation of individuals). Nurturing memories of our ancestors paves the way for the further development of future generations. Yet uncritical acceptance of tradition eliminates and prohibits progress and individual independence (this is how the avant-garde generally saw tradition). Tradition conceived as the perpetuation of dangerous ways of thinking and conservative policies is often an antagonist in contemporary art. At the same time, it exerts a fascination, as a world which civilizational development has taken from us.

CATASTROPHE

The twentieth century began in 1915, in the trenches of World War I. For the first time, chemical weapons were used in combat, bringing mass destruction. Yet the real, tragic sense of “mass destruction” was only revealed twenty-four years later, with World War II and the Holocaust. The catastrophe of the world wars is not confined to their millions of victims. War trauma undermined people’s faith in the sense of nineteenth-century progress, given it led to genocide. Artists, too, lost faith in the future.

Konrad Smoleński was born nearly forty years after World War II; his “There Is No God” is marked by catastrophe. In making an image of an empty firmament, he unequivocally points to the guilty party: ourselves.

Thus, modernity unleashed forces striving to build new worlds, but others as well. It was also inextricably linked to forces of destruction. Its unstoppable growth is also responsible for the climate catastrophe. Artists have been warning about its consequences for decades now, imagining how life might look after the final collapse of ecosystems.

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Atlas of Modernity.
The 20th and 21st Century Art Collection:
Exercises

Learn about the collection in detail by taking part in workshops, guided tours, thematic meetings, and our program for the public. Information on the public program is updated on the museum's web site (see the "Atlas of Modernity" bookmark). Sign up for the workshops and guided tours by calling (48) **605 060 063** or writing to **edu@mssl.org.pl**.

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