

μυθοποίηση – mythopoesis

Nachricht vom letzten Menschen
The Mythology of Michal Martychowiec

curated by Julian M. H. Schindele

“Jesus says: Those who seek should not stop looking until they find. And if they find they will be dismayed. And when they are dismayed, they will be amazed.”

Gospel of Thomas, Logion 2

“One no longer becometh poor or rich; both are too burdensome. Who still wanteth to rule? Who still wanteth to obey? Both are too burdensome. [...] They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health. ‘We have discovered happiness,’ – say the last men, and blink thereby.”

Friedrich Nietzsche – Thus Spoke Zarathustra

“To live means to believe: at least I believe that.”

Marcel Duchamp

Nachricht vom letzten Menschen [Message from the Last Man] is an exhibition and a parable about the relationship between faith and freedom.

The tension builds up between two characters from Michal Martychowiec’s *new mythology*. In the two-work series *The incredulity of Saint Thomas* and *Everything about the contemporary is panda*, Jesus’s disciple Thomas and the panda face each other. Thomas is a symbol of the believing doubter, the panda embodies the *last man* in Martychowiec’s work.

These figures are located in the exhibition space in two clearly separated spheres: above and below. The ‘Sphere of Thomas’ and the ‘Sphere of the Panda’. The visitors in their physicality inhabit both spheres.

The key work of the exhibition, the *Limes* that separates the aforementioned areas, is the installation *the historic level*¹: a blue neon lettering in the artist’s handwriting (‘the historic level’) hanging at exactly 78 cm (78 centimetres derive from a porcelain figure made by the artist of this height which is about the average height of pandas). Various works from the ‘Panda Saga’ hang, lie and stand below this height. In all the works in *Everything about the contemporary is panda*, the panda avatar encounters themes and objects from our cultural history. We meet the Shroud of Turin, a wanderer above the sea of fog, the obligatory banana appears and the Italian classic artist Piero Manzoni, is set into the wall as a grave slab. In a series of conceptual photographs we see the famous Berlin panda Bao Bao (currently displayed in the natural history museum) in combination with enigmatic text fragments. These fragments originate from contemporary and historic artists (Bethan Huws,

¹ The artist adopted this formulation from the Spanish historical philosopher and sociologist José Ortega y Gasset. Ortega y Gasset uses the term ‘historic level’ to describe the level of the overall population averages in terms of standard of living, education, work and leisure opportunities, etc. He is explicitly interested in the sudden rise of the *historic level* since the 1880s. In doing so, Ortega y Gasset states the accompanying loss of beliefs that guarantee existential human security. (See the essays *History as a System*, 1935 and *The Revolt of the Masses*, 1930).

Kazimir Malevich, Francisco de Goya, Joseph Beuys and others) and are used by Martychowiec as symbolic signifiers for certain (art) historical tendencies. In a video, a camera scans Bao Bao's fur, accompanied by a voiceover by the elderly Marcel Duchamp (BBC, 1968).

In Martychowiec's work the panda is an unmasking symbol of decadence at the centre of a modernity that has long become empty. The panda stands for the *last man* at the *end of history*, bound between neoliberal normativity and the decoupling from his own historical-cultural becoming. As a pop cultural symbol, it is omnipresent and can also be interpreted as a medium of Chinese 'soft-power' politics. Pandas found their biological niche through a genetic mutation in the spine, which allowed them to sit comfortably. Bamboo, their primary food source, is poor in nutrients and has to be eaten 16 hours a day. The species, which is already extinct in the wild, a museum's piece, mostly lives in so-called panda villas. There they are looked after by guards and psychologists. The majority of reproductions occur through artificial insemination.

The incredulity of Saint Thomas

At the height of the head and upper body of the exhibition visitors on the other hand, we are in the sphere of the incredulous Thomas.

If the panda in Martychowiec's work is a nihilistic symbol of the *last man* being saturated and incapable of any form of transcendence, we find a completely different symbolic configuration in the figure of the Apostle Thomas. Thomas is the holy sceptic, the empiricist. He didn't believe in Christ's resurrection and said in the gospel of John, "If I don't see the marks of the nails on his hands and put my finger in his wound on the side, I won't believe it."²

Martychowiec now elegantly couples the metaphorical dimension of the question of truth (touching the body of Christ) with the question of the concept and borders of art (since modernity). The distinction between seeing, touching, and believing, a fundamentally religious question, is being developed parallel to the question of belief in art and its borders.

In the cycle of works *The incredulity of Saint Thomas* we always encounter the same overall arrangement with two variables: a painting and several broken insulating glass panes of various shapes and formats, composed across the entire room. The painting, entitled *The incredulity of Saint Thomas: Limited by history*, is the intended breaking point. It charges, one could say, the arrangement of the panes with meaning and gives them a further dimension of symbolic depth and focus. In this case we come across the postcard-sized reproduction of an art historical representation of Thomas by the Italian painter Il Guercino from 1621.

The glass panes have a complex meaning. As broken, abstract surfaces, they represent the wound of Jesus, through which we can see and in which we can reflect ourselves in the role of Thomas. As art objects in the tradition of modernity, they refer directly to Marcel Duchamp's, *The Large Glass*. This major work of the 20th century consists of two panes of glass that broke in 1926/1927 and prompted Duchamp to declare the work completed.

² "The other disciples said to Thomas: 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them: 'If I don't see the marks of the nails on his hands and put my finger in the wound on his side, I won't believe it,'" we read in the Gospel of John. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles or disciples who accompanied Jesus as his friends and students for three years, was unlucky enough to miss the Easter resurrection. "After eight days the disciples were gathered again and Thomas was there. Then Jesus came, stepped into their midst and said: Peace be with you! Then he said to Thomas: Put your finger out – here are my hands! Reach out your hand and put it in my side, and do not disbelieve, but believe! Thomas answered him: My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him: Because you saw me, you believed. Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe."

In Martychowiec's work, Duchamp becomes a symbolic placeholder for conceptual art in general. One could even go so far as to say that the artist identifies Duchamp with Christ – as the bearer of potential truth. The question of the neon lettering above the entrance to the Thesaurós could be understood in this sense: *Has Marcel Duchamp changed the world?*