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01.

Future Days is the title of a film made in the summer of 2013 on the Swedish island of Gotland.¹ The film depicts a phantasmagoric image of a heaven inhabited by dead artists, representatives of the 20th century neo-avant-garde, bound together by a single attribute: they all, in some fashion, vanished from the art scene or discredited their own role as an artist. One of the protagonists is curator, art critic and theorist Jerzy Ludwiński, who suggested that we are living in a “post-art epoch,” and that new experimental artistic practices require a new name and language. The artists in the film seem incapable of being creative: they are condemned to aimless wandering. To be dead is to be a dark tourist (exploring the city of the dead!), stumbling against the remnants of neo-avant-garde masterpieces built into the landscape, which disintegrate because of their earthly form. In some places the heaven resembles a lumber room for works of art that have attained Assumption.



The artists are deprived of the main drive that had once spurred them onward – the fear of death and oblivion. They come into contact with eternity: it is infinitely barren and stifles the need for creativity of any sort.

02.

Paul Thek²: It seems that during our lives we all – or at least those of us who were artists with religious convictions – believed that the moment of death meant the ultimate encounter. We were all expecting it, but this condition remained unfulfilled. Crossing the boundary of death did not mean understanding the mysteries of the world, the yearning for metaphysics was not quenched; quite the contrary. The film *Future Days* captures the state of melancholy, excitement, and unfulfillment that accompanies those wandering through the heavenly meadows in search of a solution.



03.

Future Days was filmed on the Swedish island of Gotland, the largest island in the Baltic Sea. Numerous archeological digs have indicated that it has been inhabited since prehistoric times. For centuries it was a Viking settlement. In the Middle Ages Gotland was also famed for being the home base of the ruthless Vitalian Brothers, a merchants' guild whose members had switched to piracy, hijacking ships they found at sea, plundering port towns, and occupying them with their mercenaries. The Brothers' battle cry was: "God's friends and the whole world's enemies!"

In 1525, invaders from Lübeck (Germany), who had been in conflict with the inhabitants of Gotland for centuries, came to the island and burned down all the city's churches, apart from the cathedral. The ruins of the burned churches tower gloomily over the city of Visby, the capital of Gotland, to this day. Gotland is the site of ruins, fossils, rocks, and spectacular landscapes. The island is famed for its geological formations, particularly the *rauks* (rocks) that protrude from the sea. Most of the island is uninhabited.

At present, not much happens on the island. Once a year there is an event called Almedalsveckan, a kind of political festival. All politicians of any repute come to the island to make speeches in various parts of the city of Visba. Gotland is primarily known from a few films by Ingmar Bergman – the director lived on the small Gotland Isle of Faro until his dying days. His house is still there, as well as a cinema. The island also served as the backdrop for Andrei Tarkovsky's final, messianic movie, *The Sacrifice*, filmed in 1986. The film's protagonist is the actor and writer Alexander, who realizes that the world is coming to an end, that it will be destroyed by a coming nuclear war. In his prayers he promises God that he will sacrifice everything that is most important to him – his house, his family, his health, his career – if only the world is spared. He burns down his house and is taken to a mental hospital. In Tarkovsky's films, madness is a way of saving the world and uniting with a higher power.



04.

The paper and earth trap into which Paul Thek falls, alluding to his many years, even centuries, of heavenly tedium, is based on a work by Avital Geva: *The Books in Landscape Experiment*, made in 1972. It was recently rediscovered by curators working on the beginnings of land art outside of Western Europe and the USA. Geva worked on the field dividing the Arab village of Messer from the Jewish kibbutz of Metzer, founded by emigrants from Argentina. He dumped used books into the ground for several months. The books were donated by members of Ein Shemer, the kibbutz to which he belonged. In a short stretch of time mounds of books were created in various places; they were passed by the inhabitants of both villages every day on their way to work or visiting one another (the residents of the two societies maintained very good relations until 2002, when an armed Palestinian entered Metzer and killed several people). The inhabitants dug through the books and took some home, or scattered them about. The books spread chaotically throughout the area, blown about by the wind, absorbing moisture at night and baking in the sun during the day.

This was one of Geva's last art projects: shortly thereafter he devoted himself to

building *The Greenhouse* – an educational and agricultural experiment that continues to this day. The artist's greenhouse represented Israel at the Art Biennale in Venice in 1993; he grew herbs and vegetables in the national pavilion with a group of Israeli-Palestinian youths. Yoko Ono visited the pavilion and complemented Geva's cucumbers as perfect and delicious works of art.

Several accounts of the art of the 1970s distort the description of *The Books in Landscape Experiment*: Geva is said to have buried the books deep under the ground between the kibbutz and the Arab village, creating an "invisible underground library." This is probably the result of a conflation of two projects created by Israeli artists at the same time and place. Geva conducted his "behavioral experiment" by scattering books, while an artist who collaborated with him at the time, Micha Ullman, initiated the exchange of a cubic meter of earth between Mezter and Messer. This is the price to be paid by artists who attempted to loosen their ties to institutions and the market: doing so involves either subjecting oneself to fickle memory (who can remember the difference between Messer and Metzger?) or reducing one's work to an intellectual rumor that will circulate and mutate amongst a closed circle of scholars and aficionados of ephemeral art.

05.

Voice from behind the camera: Paul, would you like to talk to us about the time you spent "sitting in books?"

Paul Thek: That was a very painful time for me. For obvious reasons, I don't have much to say. I have to admit that the situation was so unbelievable that at times it amused me. I felt that it rounded off my work on *The Death of a Hippie*.

Voice: You had a great many books to read.

Paul Thek: Yes, over the course of those years I taught myself Hebrew and Arabic through reading. I slowly began to forget how to speak English.

06.

Jerzy Ludwiński³: I would like you to recall one thing from this journey we've shared. Most probably we won't be making any art today. We've missed the moment when

it turns into something else entirely, something we are unable to name. One thing is certain, however: what we will be doing today has greater possibilities!



07.

The structure of *Future Days*, the constant “stumbling” over the remains of works of art (which are, perhaps, not works of art at all, but rather their material after-effects), recalls a classic, pseudo-touristic text by Robert Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, which was first published in “Artforum” in 1967. The artists blundering through heaven are forever talking and thinking about art, the horizon of the *new* ultimately out of sight. Condemned to eternity, they can no longer dream of originality or “progress.” As Bas Jan Ader once suggested, they are “consumers of extreme comfort,” endlessly staring into the past.

The protagonists of the film have been transformed into practitioners, much like the case of the artist Włodzimierz Borowski, who became skilled in languages and exercises for the imagination, utterly abandoning the production of material artifacts. They are entirely fixated on artworks from the past, associating literally everything with art (a walk, a pile of rocks, a footpath, the sound of a radio, a wrecked car etc.). Moreover, EVERYTHING is linked to EVERYTHING: the map of

the world becomes superimposed onto the map of art history.

In the above-mentioned text about the walk through Passaic, Robert Smithson ran a mental exercise – the “appropriation” of the world as an exhibition. Armed with a cheap science-fiction novel entitled *Earthworks* (about the lack of earth to cultivate; the title pertains to the production of artificial soil), he hopped a bus from New York to his hometown. Along the way he came across several “monuments,” which he photographed, described, and interpreted. Owing to the lack of any works of art in Passaic, he concentrated on existing objects, most often tied to neglected buildings, acts of vandalism, or the degradation of materials or the environment. The list of Smithson’s monuments includes the Monument with pontoons, the Great Pipe Monument, the Fountain Monument, and the Sandbox Monument, also known as the Desert. This last found monument is supplied with a particularly interesting description. Smithson, for whom a dirty sandbox was reminiscent of the inevitable demise of the universe, the drying up of the oceans and the erosion of entire continents, wrote that this sandbox resembled an open grave – a grave in which children happily played: “The last monument was a sandbox or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazing under a bleakly glowing sun suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans – no longer were there green forests and high mountains – all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity.” A monument to entropy.



08.

Voice from behind the camera: You were the person who hesitated the longest to take part in the project: you decided to act in the film shortly before the cameras began to roll.

Charlotte Posenenske⁴: I wondered for a long time if a project like this were at all necessary. To tell the truth, I am still wondering to this day.

Voice: Can you tell us more about that?

Charlotte Posenenske: From the outset I was concerned that, by bringing in wider contexts tied to the history of art, this work would never have the power of a "clear-cut statement." On the other hand, I don't believe in creating unambiguous art; I'm aware of the fact that some knowledge is necessary for taking in art.

Voice: These dilemmas once caused you to abandon art altogether.

Charlotte Posenenske: My decision back then was mainly linked to the fact that,

being aware of these problems, I did not want to simply create political art. I didn't want to for various reasons – in general I have no use for that kind of art.

Voice: Why did you finally agree to take part in the film?

Charlotte Posenenske: When Sebastian suggested I take part I did not take his idea seriously. But in fact the final decision was not mine to make.

Voice: What do you mean?

Charlotte Posenenske: At one moment the use of my image and thoughts ceased to be linked to you having my permission. Young artists can basically do as they please, often showing a superficial interpretation of a given figure. I don't see this as a negative phenomenon. I'm only afraid that my views will be very distorted by the filmmakers, which is why, after much consideration, I decided to take part in the project, and I also gave Agnieszka a few of my texts.

Voice: Do you agree with the theses put forward in the film you acted in?

Charlotte Posenenske: I do in part. I like the theme of the isolation in which the group functions; I think it does a fairly good job of rendering the phenomenon of the isolation of art, manifesting itself in the minor, negligible impact that art has on its surroundings. I think that this group of people, observing events on Earth from a distance – through their relations with the newly-arrived dead – and possessing a powerful urge to act, but remaining mute in the face of the ruins of art accumulating in front of their eyes as they continue their journey, could represent art as such – this unfortunate art, which is capable of surviving, but is massively impotent in terms of its impact on society. But then, sadly, what difference does it make when such theses are formulated in the film, if the film itself is a perfect example of art that has no resonance in society?



09.

The axis of *Future Days* is its contemplation of eternity, the need to create things and ideas from a temporal realm that is in no way limited. In order to render the tragic inability to encompass this inhuman scale, at least to some degree, we would like to raise the issue of the storage of radioactive materials on the planet Earth. There is a great probability that uranium deposits will be exhausted in two or three hundred years. What remains as a side effect of nuclear power stations will still be lethally dangerous for the next several hundred thousand years. How can these deposits be marked so that, from a long-term perspective, the message remains legible?

We presume that humanity, if it happens to survive the next few thousand years, will not necessarily have a more advanced civilization: it is quite probable that, owing to various sorts of catastrophes, it could regress to more primitive forms of existence, such as those of the Paleolithic Period. We have no idea what languages will be in use in a few decades, a few hundred years, or a few thousand years, or if writing as such will exist at all.

In Finland a very advanced radioactive waste storage center has been built five hundred meters below the earth. It will be closed and buried in about one hundred years, the roads leading to it will be torn up, and a dense forest will grow in its place.

If, in ten thousand years or so another ice age visits this location, how can we assume that, when the glacier retreats and a settlement returns, anyone will recall that radioactive waste was once deposited there?

In places in New Mexico where there are radioactive waste deposits, signboards warn against digging until the year 12000. We cannot be sure, however, that either the signboards themselves or the languages in which they are written will survive until that date.

Nor can we be sure that, for example, the symbol of the skull and crossbones will be comprehensible to someone in a distant time.

This brings to mind the thoughts of Robert Smithson, who suggested that his art and its disintegration be considered in geological, not human time. In this scale, if we reduce the time of the period between the creation of the Earth and the present day to that of a year, the first terrestrial plants appear only at the end of November, the dinosaurs go extinct on December 26th, and our human ancestors appear only at 6:00 p.m. on December 31st.



10.

Robert Smithson's thoughts on geological time make fine bedfellows with Jerzy Ludwiński's theories of the evolution of art and the need to create a new language and new forms of communication. He compared the development of art to a snowball rolling down a hill, always growing, collecting successive parts of reality, to finally become the globe itself. Ludwiński outlined the development of art in six phases; we are presently only in the fourth phase, the stage of meta-art, which is collecting all of reality. We still have before us the total phase, which will then take us to the zero phase – art which we will no longer be able to display in a conventional manner, at an exhibition for example, and which can only be "suggested." Members of the new civilization will communicate it through telepathy.

11.

Female voice from off-camera: Did you like the idea of a film about artists' lives beyond the grave?

Andrzej Szewczyk⁵ : I have a special relationship with death. I've long been accustomed to the idea. All of my art is a slow preparation for the final departure.

All those libraries, mausoleums, gravestones, thesauruses, alphabets... Words are little deaths!

The worst thing you find in the hereafter is the deficit of good ideas. Luckily I had a notebook in my pocket with a few ideas for new works. They might not be brilliant, but I've got something to keep my hands busy. I found a small greenhouse where I can work; it's a very pleasant spot. I copy stones, prepare replicas, and give them numbers. It's work for the next several hundred years, in earthly terms! When I was alive I wanted my art to contain all the transformations of the Cosmos, and now I produce copies of stones.

(A moment of silence. Szewczyk, deep in thought, stares at his feet. After a few seconds he continues.)

Andrzej Szewczyk : I'm grateful to Agnieszka for inviting me to take part in the film, though my role is so episodic. I know that she doesn't care much for my work – and indeed, there is much that sets us apart. To her, my work must seem anachronistic. I don't know if she is aware of the extent to which I feel no attachment to materialist artists. I am no Richard Serra, for the love of God!

It seems to me that Agnieszka meddles with the past with too much nonchalance. Her films turn cold conceptualism into magical realism; she modifies the work of artists who have long been laid to rest and have nothing to say (brief pause). That impresses me, a great deal even.

**12.**

Robert Smithson's texts from the late 1960s can be applied to institutional critique: the liberation of art from the "jurisdiction" of museums, even to the salvation of the world through art. He wrote that a stroll through a museum was a journey from "one void to another" (precisely the case for the protagonists of *Future Days*!). All that lies in wait for the viewer, and perhaps for creatures from foreign civilizations who will one day land on our planet (or perhaps for the dead who will return from the afterlife?), is anachronisms in the form of sculptures and pictures, which pretend to be "windows" to another, parallel reality. Smithson postulated leaving a few of the better-designed museums as sculptures, vacated of all their works of art. At the same time, he was excited by the thought that, at any moment, the whole world might turn into a museum. The supermarkets going bankrupt, the garbage dumps, the abandoned factories, the military bases, the nuclear test sites, the gas stations, billboards etc. – all of these could be regarded as works of art. To his mind, there was no difference between canonical works of art created in the landscape and destroyed, and, for example, a mine slag heap that was created by action of the human species. This is the world becoming exhibition. A new era of radical tourism has begun.

13.

Bas Jan Ader⁶: This film was one of the best things that happened to me after my death. It was good to feel a bit of solid ground beneath my feet (laughs). I loved Gotland, it's such a dramatic and sublime place! I adore my new friends, particularly Charlotte: I believe she is fiendishly intelligent.

The last time I felt so at peace as I did in Gotland was many years ago, when I took a walk with my father through the forest. That was back during the war. I was only a few years old. We searched for mushrooms. We gathered a whole bucket full of them, but all the ones we gathered looked poisonous. It seemed a shame to throw them away; we kept walking around, hungry. Later on we cooked them, and they were great. I remember how father marched through the forest: we came across a thick undergrowth, pushed past the branches, his whole face was covered in spiderwebs. The whole time he sang; he kept singing the same old tune:

If here on earth
No sparrow falls, then with Your will
Lord, my heart will be comforted and still
That your hand protects me too

'tis not because of me: I have fought with the best
By day nor night desired rest
I have suffered with the damned
And now sail to a bright and distant land.



Footnotes

1 *Future Days*, written by visual artist Agnieszka Polska and curator and writer Sebastian Cichocki, is the fruit of an experimental residency program in Gotland (an unexpected one, which was realized a few months after the residency was finished), in which Polska (invited by Cichocki) participated. "The Site Residency" series is run by the Baltic Arts Center, taking place on the island of Gotland and, in future, in a set of conceptually linked locations in other countries or continents, chosen for their special features: oddness, remoteness, "exoticism," seclusion, harshness, or unique architectural values. The program is a tribute to artistic strategies from the 1960s and 70s – an escape from rigid institutional structures and studio-based production. It is structured to reduce stimuli and thereby motivate a new artistic approach towards the place/work system – which is always an equation with two unknowns. The character of this residency specifically implies that the artist is to refrain from production. Additionally, the curators provide the artists with certain "scripts" to be performed during the residency period. These are to be simple and general instructions, which are subtly interwoven into the program, rather than

imposing a "master plan" on the residents' stay. In the end, the group of artists and curators, working with ghost-writers, translate the residency experience into literary fiction. This text is a collage of notes made after the "Future Days" film was finished. None of the dialogues or comments was used in the film, even though we believe they would have fit well there. The text is based on fragments of a staged lecture delivered by us at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London.

2 Paul Thek (passed away in 1988) was an outstanding American artist who made paintings, sculptures, and installations, and whose work created the basis for many trends visible in the art of the past twenty years. His most well-known works, such as *Technological Reliquaries* or *The Tomb*, combine witty references to contemporaneous art movements, such as pop art or minimalism, with an interest in the Christian cult of the reliquary. Fascinated by life after death, after his own death he succumbed to a creative impotence. He no longer created any more works of art, "killing time" (a gloomy joke that he repeated whenever possible) as he walked for months at a time, doing physical exercises and getting lost in thought.

3 Jerzy Ludwiński (passed away in 2000) was a theorist, lecturer, art critic, and an adherent of "notional art," through which, "instead of creating visual objects, artists were to simply write down texts, on whose basis the pieces could be made concrete in one way or another." He declared the need to prepare for an entirely new kind of art, which would be utterly non-material and would not require institutional support. He exercised his ability to telepathically transfer art after his death, encouraging his friends to take part as well.

4 Charlotte Posenenske (passed away in 1985) was a German minimalist sculptor and a socialist. Posenenske wanted her sculptures (most often resembling ventilation shafts) to be touched by the viewer, and arranged in the space as he or she pleased. Disappointed by art's lack of impact on reality, she abandoned it for the social sciences in 1968. She spent the rest of her life working on employment and industrialization. After her death she returned to art, reconstructing her key works of the late 1960s out of organic materials. The artist said in an interview: "My works change nothing and no one. In reality, which is one great big fossil, the act of making art is a *double negation*."

5 Andrzej Szewczyk (passed away in 2001) was an erudite artist, a lover of German philosophy, symphonic music, and literature. His art was concerned with fundamental issues of life and death, memory, and language. He became known as an artist who painted canvases with a roller brush, who meticulously filled in children's coloring books with watercolors, and produced image-texts using pistachio shells or pencil-crayon shavings. After his death, he was entirely consumed by a single project, rendered with excruciating slowness: making clay copies of all the stones he found in heaven.

6 Bas Jan Ader (vanished without a trace in 1975) is one of the greatest legends of conceptual art. Most of Ader's work was tied to falling (rolling off a roof, tumbling from a branch, falling into a sewer on his bicycle, dropping stones etc.). At the end of his life, Ader got involved in vegetable profiteering, and had several simultaneous love affairs. Despite generally accepted theories, Ader did not end his short life in the 1970s. Ironically, he died at sea, during a solo journey across the Atlantic (this time going in the opposite direction – from Europe to the United States), exactly ten years after his first voyage.