

# CYCLE OF MATTER. UN-TAMING.

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**Aleksandra Jach:** Joanna, you are running a project in Wrocław, involving cooperation with an existing ecosystem at Niskie Łąki. A derelict transformer station building located in the vicinity of the Oława River will be used as a specific frame for a 'live' sculpture. The modernist architecture will slowly become overgrown by a variety of plants. Direct human support for this ecosystem involves planting ferns, ivy, geraniums, moss, spindle, etc. The local and ruderal species will coexist. The project will be connected to the water network – the building will be 'watered'. Electricity will also be provided. Before we talk about the project, let's focus on its archaeology for a moment. How did it come about that you chose Niskie Łąki for this idea?

**Joanna Rajkowska:** The road to *Trafostation* was a long one because you wait years for such projects. The thought of 'returning' architecture to non-human forces came to mind for the first time when Masza Potocka asked me for some ideas for one of the buildings of the former Schindler's factory near MOCAK in Kraków. I thought that we were weary of taming trauma, so maybe this time we could un-tame it. Flood the building with water, plant seeds, and leave it. Since we humans had failed, maybe other species would do better. Of course, a plethora of aesthetical questions arose (e.g. what does 'better' mean?) that I am not able to answer. The thought returned much more powerfully in 2012 when I was working on *Swamptown* [*Sumpfstadt*], a project for Schlossplatz in Berlin. Here the historical burden was much greater: Prussian, Nazi and DDR heritage – soaked in atrocities – so the project was more radical. It necessitated that the human element would be completely removed: the site would be divided into a stage (the swamp – a form of reserve) and an audience (people) forbidden from entering the stage. Neither of these projects were realized. I had been searching for over a year for an opportunity to speak about the fear of water in Wrocław. The subject simply emerged as one of those profound intuitions, too compelling to dismiss. In Wrocław, they say that children, when asked about the greatest hazard for the city, reply: "Water." Yet they are too young to remember the 1997 flood. I was invited to Wrocław by a team running arts projects for the European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016, for the programme *Wrocław – Backyard Door*, to be precise.

The projects I proposed were either too difficult logistically or too dangerous. For example, I thought of constructing a very simple, single-storey concrete façade in the Oława River. It transpired that the river must be completely free of obstructions because of the risk of even greater damage during flooding. When Natalia Romaszkan suggested placing the project at the transformer building, we had everything – the key element was to be water cascading through the building and the gradual formation of an ecosystem.

**A. J.:** I have been wondering what I should call your proposal, is it a sculpture or an installation? A living machine? However you describe it, it seems awkward within the context of the importance to you of the agency of the non-human within this project. How far do you go yourself and how far will you allow other organisms to go? Where are your boundaries?

**J. R.:** To some extent, the power of the weather is so enormous that it is sufficient to use it as a project *de facto*, admit to failure at the beginning and that's it. I know it sounds odd, but my never-ending battle with experimental technologies in the crown of the palm tree [*Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*], all of which failed, were for me a lesson learnt – you are not going to win against wind, rain, sleet and a temperature range of 600C. After 2002, I never again designed a project to resist the passage of time and the natural ageing of material. In particular, I am waiting for *Rosa's Passage* to age, for lime efflorescence in the joints, for cracks in the silver of the mirrors, and moss which may form over the lower parts of the mosaic facing north. And maybe a similar process will occur with *Chariot*.

Naturally, plants are best at it – millions of years of evolution have not been in vain:). Hence a logical consequence of my technical failures is to turn to the experts, in this instance to plants. I take the liberty of initial action, then other organisms take over the responsibility for the life of the project. *Oxygenator* proved that such a split of responsibilities works in the political sphere as well:). In *Trafostation*, thinking about the life of the project matter – its decomposition and erosion is carried out through to the end. So it might be a living machine. A perfectly calibrated machine for the circulation of matter.

The question about boundaries touches upon many senses in *Trafostation*. Including probably the most significant one – the question of the reason for such a project. I hope that one of the answers lies in the recognition of the ethical boundaries in managing matter.

**A.J.: There are various politics when it comes to handling animate and inanimate matter. We give more value to what is most useful to humans. It is very visible in environmental movements fighting for the so-called flag species. It is similar when it comes to the locations which have become the icons of campaigns to preserve biodiversity, such as the Amazon, and they are the reason for investment and promotion of sustainable environmental policies. Many experts and a wide range of institutions cannot afford statements like: "Everything is changing", "People have always been changing their environment, conquering yet another ecological niche". They worry that it may be interpreted as consent to rampant exploitation of the environment. I have observed in arts activities, as well as in *Trafostation*, evidence that you might discuss it and not diverge from the complexity of problems related to cooperation with other species.**

**J.R.:** Whichever way I think, I always come back to the same conclusion – there are too many of us. Limiting the human population seems to me to be absolutely crucial. In a reasonable, responsible, but effective manner. No matter how hard we try (and humankind is not particularly keen on making efforts which do not result in direct benefits), territorial expansion, natural resources exploitation and wastage will destroy this planet's resources. Once I talked about it with a London activist and she said: "Come on, there is space for everyone." Sure, once we get rid of all the other species, there is bound to be. I see no arguments for our insane breeding. In 1250, Berlin was inhabited by 1200 people, in 2013, by 3,517,424. I find expansion, resources consumption and the issue of waste frightening. In no way should we give value to the benefits for humankind, but to what serves environmentally sustainable development. We should do our best to reduce the speed of our species' expansion.

**A.J.: People have been discussing it since the 60s, when Anna and Paul Ehrlich wrote *Population Bomb*. Their book became a symbol for reproduction control related movements. Back then and now, it is a very controversial issue. Do you believe in self-control by *Homo sapiens*?**

**J.R.:** I believe in systemic self-control. However, my work is located in a totally different area. I don't mean biodiversity or to create some ecological model. This is not scientific activity. This is a gesture of resignation, a slight shift of emphasis, our – people's – withdrawal from a domain perceived as absolutely human, from architecture. I mean to alter the perception of our human productions as well as the force of plants or water. Concluding, I definitely do not intend to take a position symmetrical to science because, having the tools of art, I am privileged to work on entirely different assumptions. What the audience (human and non-human) will witness is a display of vegetation, life cycles, natural growth and decomposition of organisms and the erosion of architecture. This is the spectacle that I have in mind. And, at the same time, engendering awareness of the extent to which we are inessential as a species. This process is obvious, it is in progress everywhere and all the time. *Trafostation* is only a frame for this.

Yesterday, we found that we had to ask two homeless people to leave the building. In spring, when someone noticed piles of rubbish and sleeping bags, we assumed that somebody was there only temporarily, but now it turns out that this is their home. This changes the overtone of the project entirely. None of us feel good about it.



**A.J.: Tell me more about it. Who spoke to them? What do you know about them? Do they have any alternative?**

**J.R.:** Natalia, Maciek and Bartek met only one person. Natalia emailed me: "The man was alone, just one, we arrived and informed him that we would like him to be gone the following day because we were about to start building works. He was not aggressive, he took it in calmly. He was in a terrible condition, severely beaten, but he did not want an ambulance and told us he had somewhere to go. Terrible dirt was everywhere inside and outside – rubbish, food, excrement, blood."

**A. J.: Exactly, such is the complexity of projects such as *Trafostation*. To make space for non-humans, sometimes humans have to leave... This is sad.**

**I would like to ask you about the "spectacle" you are preparing. Biomimicry, bionics, biocentrism are clues from the modern era with much older origins, which at some stage gained scientific legitimacy. I am thinking about a change which has occurred in representing and/or mediating non-humans. Have you seen László Moholy-Nagy's film about London Zoo? Moholy-Nagy cooperated with Julian Huxley, the secretary of the Zoological Society, who had befriended several Bauhaus members after they fled Nazi Germany. Huxley wanted the zoo to showpiece avant-garde architecture. He believed that some ideas were perhaps too radical for people, but they might be tested on animals. He wanted to exhibit the animals in such a manner so they could be observed as in a laboratory, and, simultaneously, the designed habitat would influence them positively both physically and cognitively.**

**The idea was that well-treated animals will become 'better animals', whatever that meant. The film by Moholy-Nagy displays this architecture fantastically – minimalist but at the same time providing the best scenography for the show. The zoos created nowadays – especially in Western Europe, Australia or USA – are open spaces replicating their original habitat as closely as possible. They are places that allow more 'freedom' for animals. All of which is so that we can follow and observe them in a different way – through technology. Yet, everything boils down to the opportunity to watch: to human perception, satisfied in a variety of manners. I am wondering how to think about your work within this context.**

**J.R.:** And at this point we reach the very core. It is OK to think like that. When I watched the film, it reminded me of my shock when I saw up close (and sniffed) the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer in Brasilia. In the Brazilian climate, those ideal forms are quickly overgrown with a tide of weird organisms, producing fantastic efflorescence on the surfaces of this perfect modernist architecture. It is totally unstoppable, it grows as you watch it. Cracking joints, fissures, flaking paint, mould and fungus, moss and lichen. My plan was to confront this architecture with footage. It was an entirely personal record created by film editors from the photos I gave them – images of a shrinking tumour in one of Rosa's eyes\*. An enormous white, spongy form is shrinking. Niemeyer's building, Museo Nacional, looks exactly like an eyeball. To me it was an expression of my relief that chemotherapy had worked and Rosa would keep her eye and probably her vision. But it was also a question regarding error in architecture, so formally perfect. What is the rationale for the existence of error in general? Including genetic error. When I watched Moholy-Nagy's film, I thought that the physiology of those animals at the zoo was one great flaw next to those super-forms. *Trafostation* is exactly on the opposite end of the scale.



**A.J.:** The border between an adaptation from the passing of 'successful' genes to offspring and one resulting from a genetic or environmentally-caused error is hardly clear. It can be established only *a posteriori*. Additionally, such a border will be anthropocentric, it will usually attribute higher value to the phenomena beneficial to our species. I had retinoblastoma myself. In Poland, in the 80s, this illness resulted in removal of the eyeball or death. I found the book by Siddharth Mukherjee *The Emperor of All Maladies. A biography of Cancer* a breakthrough in thinking about the body and cancer: there, a cancer cell is described as an example of organisational, survival genius. The speed at which it reproduces is incredible and it can lead to the death of the host body. In his depiction of a tumour's strategy, Mukherjee makes an analogy between capitalism and the 'egoism' of a tumorous cell which wants to survive and does not worry about the survival of its environment. To me it is also a story of non-human 'creativity'... This homeless man is stuck in my mind. That he had to leave...

**J.R.:** This is one of the situations when all you can do is just look down in shame. He is unlikely to go to hospital, but *Trafostation* is the last place where he could have recovered, lying there in his own faeces. Nevertheless, this man's shadow has remained.

You say *a posteriori* – you mean in the light of a defined and understood direction of evolution? The overgrowing of a retina destroys its most important property, light sensitivity, and finally the eye itself and the body of the host, is rather an error (from the point of view of *Homo sapiens*). Once, I wondered with Andrew, Rosa's father, whether retinoblastoma could be a failed attempt to fulfil the ancient concept of a third eye. The fact that I met you, with your retinoblastoma history, at a very difficult time for me, was important. When I think about Rosa's future, I somehow see you. And it is a relief.

Despite my fear for her, sometimes I think about cancer as a way of salvation. After all, it is a very efficient method for reduction of our species which acts like a tumorous cell towards its environment. London, for instance, is like a lush tumour. The late capitalist reality is something rather scary. The speed of gentrification, the speed of capital expansion, all the dysfunctions resulting from it, rapid decomposition and atrophy of state institutions, with the NHS being a prime example, privatisation at every step and the accompanying physical expansion – the uncontrollable activity of developers. Returning to architecture once more, because it seems to be one of the key threads – as far back as I can remember, a building has been for me an incredibly organic entity. I tried to recognise buildings in a very somatic way, trying to sense the energy points, ligaments, sensitive and insensitive surfaces, openness, weaknesses. What was also significant was whether a building "sees" me, whether it has sexuality, whether it is male or female...

**A.J.:** I'll come back to architecture, but first I would like to briefly add something to your ideas about individual and species perspective. You can understand cancer as a form of natural selection, just as you can many other factors. The problem is that it is very difficult. How to move about between the tradition of European individualism, the religious and non-religious sanctity of life, and remembering that we are only one of many beings in this world and we have no control over evolutionary processes. This causes anxiety. Talking of architecture, have you 'tamed' *Trafostation* in any way? Did this gesture of 'wildening' mean 'un-taming'? What happened there between you and its local life cycle?

**J.R.:** In order to understand anything I shorten the lens and view everything in wide-angle. I think it is an attempt to move further away, to gain perspective; an attempt to protect against the inevitable trauma inflicted by life. When I consider my projects from recent years, I reach far, far out in time – *Peterborough Child* is Bronze Age and the *Zechstein Sea* is Permian:). *Trafostation* is an excursion into the future, beyond my short stay here. I fear and respect this great biological machine which finally turns everything into compost. I really would like to accept this compost somehow.

*Trafostation* is this kind of effort. Today I had the idea that maybe I should dedicate it to my cousin in Wrocław, whom I always see during my project visits. He suffers from multiple sclerosis – these are his final years.

At the same time I'll answer your second question – *Trafostation* is definitely a gesture of un-taming. It is not a labelled pot plant. It is to be a preparation for the inevitable – the circulation of matter.

\* Rosa is the artist's daughter, who was diagnosed with retinoblastoma as a baby.