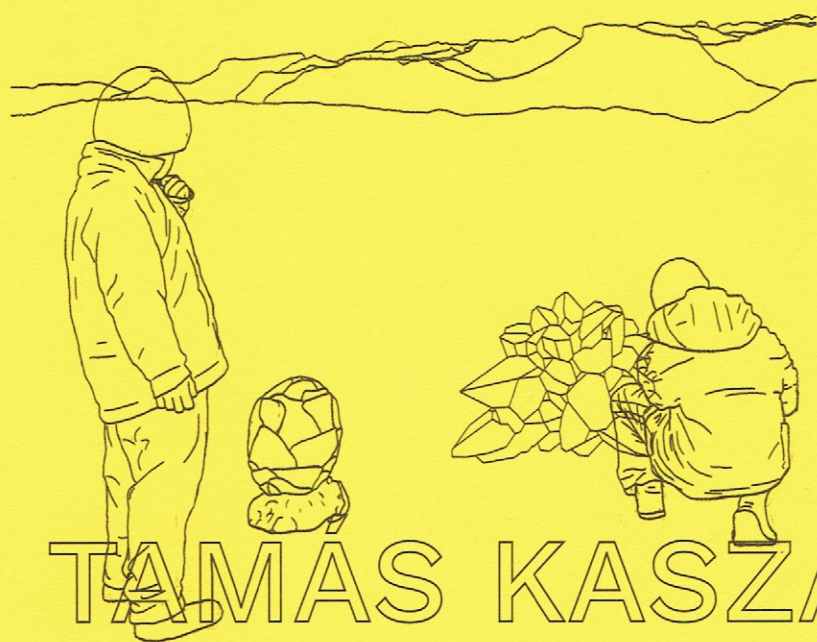


# ĆWICZENIA W AUTONOMII

/ EXERCISES  
IN AUTONOMY



WE WSPÓŁPRACY  
Z ANIKÓ LORÁNT  
(EX-ARTISTS'  
COLLECTIVE)

/ FEATURING  
ANIKÓ LORÁNT  
(EX-ARTISTS'  
COLLECTIVE)

# / EXPERIMENTS IN UNTAMED CREATIVITY: ANTHROPOLOGY AS A TOOL IN TAMÁS KASZÁS'S PRACTICE

Maja Fowkes  
and Reuben Fowkes

Invited to produce a work in the format of an advertising billboard for the 2016 Bucharest Biennial, Tamás Kaszás responded literally by designing a one-off poster for his upcoming solo exhibition that was to open one month later at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. The print incorporated a black and white woodcut showing seven figures grouped together with defiant, open-mouthed faces, beneath the handwritten French title *La Pensée Sauvage* from modernist-anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Reaching out to the local public from within the constraints of a generic city light box, a further text in Romanian addressed viewers with the subliminal observation that 'those who know the truth do not advertise it,' while additional information provided in English, giving the title, dates and venue for his show in Poland, was of primary relevance to professional visitors to the Biennial. The polyphony of linguistic registers and cultural references in this multilayered artistic intervention points to the artist's predilection for subversive propaganda, tendency towards the repurposing of forms and ideas, as well as his current interest in anthropology as a critical tool to counter the aesthetic and political ideologies of post-industrial society.

Differentiating between the 'untamed state' of the 'savage mind' and cultivated or domesticated thought, Lévi-Strauss singled out art, 'to which our civilisation accords the status of a national park,' as a zone in which 'savage thought, like savage species is relatively protected.'<sup>1</sup> Pursuing his artistic practice experiments of untamed creativity, Kaszás takes advantage of the relative shelter provided by the art context to investigate alternative social and ecological models. For these endeavours, the preferred location is the rural periphery, where on the interface of nature and culture favourable conditions are found for the peripheral to meet the feral. Noting

---

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 219.

that in Romance languages the notion of 'wild' (*sauvage, selvaje, selvaggio*) derives from *silva*, the great European forest that Roman colonisers saw as 'an uncultivated space to be cleared,' anthropologist Philippe Descola pointed out that its meaning was always dependent on an antithetical understanding of the affirmative qualities of *domus* as 'an environment for living.'<sup>2</sup> He also described the later historic inversion of their associations, whereby 'what was wild could be good, and what was civilised could be bad,' a switch that did not render the 'interplay of reciprocal meanings' of the 'wild' and the 'domesticated' any less 'mutually interdependent.'<sup>3</sup> In that sense, the battle cry on the painted faces shouting from Kaszás's Bucharest poster extols the values of wild thought and expresses indigenous rage directed towards a civilisation heading towards collapse.

Kaszás's artistic practice revolves around anthropological propositions that destabilise the boundaries between nature and culture, wild and domesticated, indigenous and modern, technological and crafted, placing the question of the 'anthropos' in the foreground. This is of particular relevance nowadays when 'the age of humans' has been suggested as the most accurate denotation for the current geological epoch. The Anthropocene, a term that came into the spotlight in 2000 when scientist Paul Crutzen urged that it be added to the Geological Time Scale superseding the Holocene, stands for recognition of the magnitude of 'human-induced changes to the Earth system.'<sup>4</sup> Evidence of human impact can be traced in the rock strata, recognised in modified planetary processes, such as anthropogenic warming, as well as in the transformation of the relationship of humans to the natural world as our species, has become a decisive geological force. According to theorist Bruno Latour, the concept of the Anthropocene 'pushes anthropology to the centre stage' and demands the reopening of 'the key question of what is common and what is specific in various ways of inhabiting the Earth.'<sup>5</sup> What is more, to 'be on planet Earth at the time of Anthropocene,' as Latour warned, means 'that all field studies are studying devastated sites in crisis.'<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, it is in response to the apprehension of the planet in crisis that Kaszás has turned to anthropology, drawing from the resourcefulness of the 'savage mind' and focusing on the non-urban environment to re-imagine strategies for not just mere but also meaningful survival.

---

2. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 48–49.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

4. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, (eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in the New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–3.

5. Bruno Latour, 'Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene –A Personal View of What Is to Be Studied,' Distinguished lecture at American Association of Anthropologists, Washington, December 2014, [online], <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/139-AAA-Washington.pdf>.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

An abundance of anthropological citations surface throughout Kaszás's practice and can be detected in his interest in the ways in which various communities live today, as well as in the culture and society of our ancestors in particular times and spaces. The era of the 1920s and 30s, and foremost the artistic language, political outlook and visual language of utopian and left wing groups, is for example a recurring preoccupation, a specific social constellation that speaks also about the precarity of a material culture on the brink of transformation to an oil dependent, technological modernity. The material relics of 'actually existing socialism' are also an important source for his excavation of the lost utopian core of the project to build an egalitarian society on communal principles. Historical anthropology takes Kaszás back to the peasant culture of the pre-modern period, revisited for the distinctiveness of that people's relation to food production, small-scale social formations and embeddedness in the natural world, while the thousand-year history of wild peasant protests against the erosion of traditional livelihoods holds a special allure. The artist's critical stance towards the social and economic organisation of society under the conditions of global capitalism leads him to carry out 'autonomy exercises' in a future anthropology, from modelling a post-collapse aesthetics of self-built architecture to imagining sustainable methods of food production, modes of communal living and the flourishing of creativity of a prospective ideal community. The investigation of communication and solidarity across species in his most recent work also resonates with a post-human anthropology fit for the age of the Anthropocene, and is a further point of reference in the discussion of Kaszás's manifold artistic practice.

Taking the prospect of future scarcity and collapse into his own aesthetics, the artist turns to printmaking, such as simple techniques of woodcuts and linocut that require inexpensive and readily available materials, in anticipation of the coming post-digital age. Significantly, the artist draws here on the repertoire of left wing activist groups of the 1920s, which used these reproduction techniques for propaganda purposes to direct our attention towards today's burning issues. One of his graphic sheets depicts an image of interlocked land masses of our planet encompassed by a star-strewn cosmic envelope over which an inscription proclaims 'We are all from Pangaea.' This is an appeal for planetary solidarity that points beyond political temporalities and territorial identities by putting them into deep historical perspective. Literally meaning 'whole Earth' Pangaea is a term borrowed from geologists, who use it to refer to the last supercontinent that existed 200 million years ago when all the continents coalesced into one terrestrial body surrounded by a single ocean. Scientific discoveries around the formation and splitting of continents have revealed the Earth to be 'a highly dynamic system' with a 'deep history' that is 'not only unimaginably lengthy, but also amazingly eventful.'<sup>7</sup> By visualising the lost supercontinent,

---

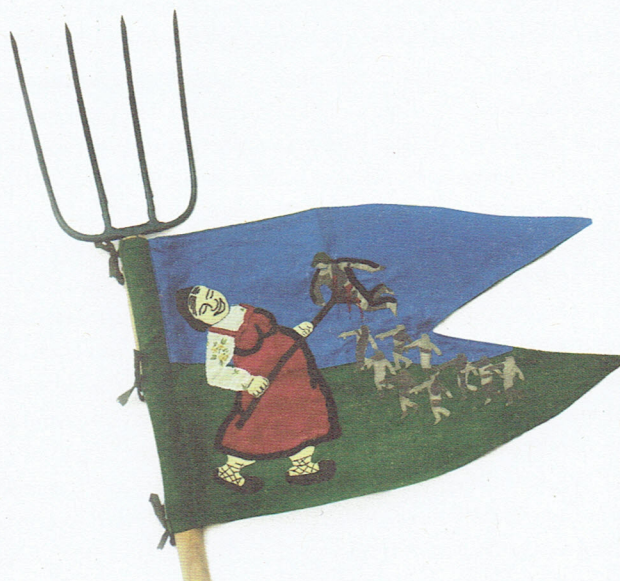
7. Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Earth's Deep History: How It Was Discovered and Why It Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 260.

the artist both points to the longevity of the geological history of our planet and the fact that there is nothing fixed or predictable about its future. The transformative power of natural matter that once formed the world without borders also stands as a strong metaphor for the interdependence of all the Earth's inhabitants by erasing geo-political rivalries and cultural and ethnic polarities to suggest a shared 'cosmopolitical' proposition. Notably, such an outlook represents a reframing of politics on a planetary scale that reaches beyond settled categories, borders and territories to take into account the interests of a variety of human and non-human actors.<sup>8</sup>

A world without borders is also the organising principle of economic globalisation, conceived not in terms of planetary solidarity but rather through the removal of trade barriers, the unlimited permeability of capital and the expanding frontiers of extractivism of the Earth's matter. The exhaustion of resources has been a recurring environmental question in modern societies, perceived through the limits of natural wealth and the growing scarcity of planetary reserves but with the rise of technological industrialism in the twentieth century and in particular 'since the universalisation of oil, the question of exhaustion became structural.'<sup>9</sup> The underlying issue haunting the whole neo-liberal capitalist system is therefore whether we have 'reached a peak in global output for oil, coal, phosphorous and even soil,' a tipping point after which 'a post-peak world of scarcity ensues.'<sup>10</sup> It is just such a scenario that is visualised in another of Kaszás's graphic sheets consisting of two contrasting predictions for a future 'After Oil,' one of which anticipates the coming of 'New Slavery,' while the other offers a brighter outcome under the heading 'Folk Science.'

The scenarios of the post-petroleum world depicted by the artist are delivered through the interlinked issues of technology, agriculture and social organisation. The vision of social life after oil in the 'New Slavery' variant is a labour-intensive dystopia in which humans are forced to take the place of fossil fuel-dependent technologies and are depicted carrying on their backs the relics of carbon civilisation, from plastic containers to filing cabinets and missiles. In political terms, this is a hierarchical society based on violence and oppression. This corresponds to political theorist Timothy Mitchell's analysis of 'carbon democracy,' according to which 'the limits of contemporary democratic politics can be traced in relation to oil,' while the 'possibility of a more democratic future,' depends on 'the political tools with which we address the passing of the era of fossil fuel.'<sup>11</sup> As is suggested by

- 
8. See: Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) and Bruno Latour, 'Whose Cosmos, which Cosmopolitics?' (*Common Knowledge* Vol. 10, No. 3, 2004).
  9. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 196.
  10. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London, Verso 2015), p. 106.
  11. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 254.



*Agrokultura (detail) / Agro-culture (detail)*  
2011  
kolekcia Balázs-Dénes, Budapest  
/ Balázs-Dénes Collection, Budapest

the bleak future narrated on the artist's propaganda sheet, with the passing of the era of cheap energy there is nothing inevitable about the continuation of modern democracy and the welfare state.

The more appealing version of the social contract is addressed by the artist in the 'Folk Science' scenario, in which hand-crafted tools designed on the principles of traditional practical knowledge to ease the burden of transport depend on co-operation and social equality. The manual tools depicted by Kaszás are reminiscent of rural life before the farming revolution of the mid-twentieth century, when it was oil that 'transformed European agriculture, which adopted tractors, chemical fertiliser and pesticides' to create a model of 'petro-farming' that also 'proved highly costly in terms of energy.'<sup>12</sup> By combining the vision of a post-oil future with the crucial issue of agriculture, the artist poignantly turned to 'folk science' for solutions that originate in native knowledge. Significantly, it has been indigenous movements that have taken 'a central role in the rise of the current wave of fossil fuel resistance,' and what is more, there has been growing awareness that 'the ways of life that indigenous groups are protecting have a great deal to teach about how to relate to the land in ways that are not purely

12. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, p. 245.

extractive.<sup>13</sup> This could be taken as further confirmation of the relevance of anthropology for the critique of petro-culture that the artist emphasised on his agitational posters, including *Famine Orchards*, that depicts a person planting a fruit tree in the middle of a housing estate. Indeed, it has also been commented that only with 'alternative farming practices premised on agro-ecology, permaculture and other non-capitalist agronomies,' will it be possible to achieve future-oriented agricultural productivity.<sup>14</sup>

Envisioning survival in an age of crisis is not only related to the crucial issue of food production, but also to the question of architecture that the artist has continuously addressed in his practice. Understood in the broadest sense, architecture has, as art theorist Elizabeth Grosz observed, the 'capacity to both extend man's destruction of the environment,' as well as to 'invent new modes of co-existence, more sustainable ways of living and more aesthetic experiences of inhabitation.'<sup>15</sup> Kaszás refers to both these functions of architecture, critically assessing the modernist indifference to the environmental impact of the construction processes that reflected the anthropocentrism of its utopian models, while also turning to anthropology to propose a more sustainable and future-oriented architectural vision. He investigates the subject from various standpoints that range from probing the act of squatting to exploring the anarchic potential of 'favela' architecture, assembling an anthropological archive of self-made homes as well as referencing the legacy of modernist housing in its mass socialist form.

Born in Dunaújváros, a Stalinist new town on the banks of the Danube that was built from scratch in the 1950s in a socialist-realist style, the artist often returns to his own experience of growing up in an ideologically constructed urban environment. In an ongoing project first carried out in 2001, the artist invites visitors to 'Be a Tourist on the Architect's Desk!' by leading tours around 'a town without tourism, history or natural wonders.'<sup>16</sup> Interested to reveal what remains of the socialist city builders' 'utopian ideas after their realisation,' the artist guides groups to defunct monuments, relics of communist decoration in shops and streets, as well as a rusting open air exhibition of socialist industrial prowess.<sup>17</sup> Over the decades, the strict Stalinist regime of control decayed and gave way to the deviant practices of late Socialism, through which city dwellers began to mould and appropriate architectural elements to their own needs. Interestingly, Kaszás imagines a similar process occurring in a 'post-apocalyptic' future in which the 'ideas

13. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 370.

14. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, pp. 286–287.

15. Elizabeth Grosz in Conversation with Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 'Time Matters: On Temporality in the Anthropocene' in *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, ed. Etienne Turpin (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2013), p. 131.

16. 'Be a tourist on the Architect's desk!' double-sided A2 poster of the programme of Intercultural Orientation, (Dunaújváros 2006).

17. Ibid.

and vocabulary' of modernist aesthetics would be recycled and refashioned by the 'survivors of collapse' to form the basis of a 'future folklore'.<sup>18</sup>

This approach was applied in the elaborate mixed media installation *Megashelter* (2011), which consists of an open metal construction with colourful elements that holds platforms for scale models of imaginary slum dwellings and shelters. By positioning the work on a traditional woven carpet, the artist subverts the overbearing proportions of the modernist architectural mega structures that thrived in the utopian visions of architects who designed the technicist megacities of the late 1950s and 1960s. With their futuristic orientation, fuelled by the unprecedented scientific and technological progress when even the sky was no limit to human exploration, the enthused architects imagined cities on a new scale as single high-density, multifunctional mega structures that were designed to conquer previously uninhabitable territories of the planet. In that sense, these utopian plans with their complete indifference to history and tradition, which as a genuine international trend appeared on both sides of the Cold War divide, have been analysed as representing 'the high watermark of Modernist urbanisation in the twentieth century'.<sup>19</sup>

Indicatively, Kaszás challenges the utopianism of such impersonal machine-like constructions by turning to the long-lasting tradition of self-made homes, whose builders have a direct and emotive connection to their immediate environment. Critiquing the growth and progress-oriented economic system on which the culture of mega structures was based, the artist proposes the more ecological vision of the mega shelter, the primary purpose of which is to provide refuge in times of need, as a response to the growing crisis brought by the extractivist frenzy of late capitalism. In the changed social, political and economic circumstances, the makers of such handcrafted dwellings, faced with scarcity and deprivation, are compelled to rely on reusing found industrial or organic elements. Combining traditional skills with post-technological creative improvisation, in which form and function is moulded by the users themselves, also brings independence from the pre-formed design models associated with the professionalisation of architecture.

As anthropologist Tim Ingold has observed, unlike architects for whom the finished building stands as the 'crystallisation of an original design concept,' for resident-builders who continually 'improvise solutions to problems' and relentlessly 'wrestle with materials,' it is 'the process that claims their energy and attention'.<sup>20</sup> The anthropological challenge to the narrow specialisation of professional architects and urbanists can also be deduced from the artist's *Home Made Home Manifesto* (2011), which further extends his reflection on issues of dwelling and habitation. Here Kaszás draws on the

---

18. Tamás Kaszás, *Visual Aid* (Budapest, Kisterem, 2013).

19. David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds. *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008), p. 254.

20. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 48.

avant-garde writings of László Moholy Nagy to distinguish between the partial and disembodied perspective of 'slice-man' and the interconnected and embedded knowledge of the pre-modern 'whole man.' Centring his folk science approach on the provocative imagery of the caveman, primitive man and the savage mind, the artist counters the control exercised by a monopoly of bureaucrats, developers and architects on the home-making process by pointing to the long history of self-building.

In architectural history, a critique that corresponds to Kaszás's folk science approach was articulated at the beginning of the 1970s when architects rejected the lack of social engagement in the high modernism of the 1960s in a tendency that has recently been termed 'hippie modernism' for its fusion of countercultural thinking with alternative uses of technology adapted for 'personal creative effect and collective betterment.'<sup>21</sup> A case in point could be the Italian Radical Architecture movement, which attacked the ineffectiveness of conventional mainstream architecture and design devoted to 'merely satisfying superficial desires rather than meeting real needs,' and focused instead on the creation of 'provocative prototypes, paper-based cities and experimental structures' for a post-capitalist 'life without objects.'<sup>22</sup> Significantly, through the appropriation of their own folk tradition and that of other cultures, which they experienced on their travels both to the countercultural haven of California as well as on pilgrimages to India and Nepal, the Radicals' 'anthropological attitude' expressed the continuous 'primitivist approach' to achieve more meaningful existence.<sup>23</sup>

The critical stance towards the capitalist commodification of objects, social insensitivity of mainstream modernist architecture and misuse of technology that radical hippie designers expressed in the early 1970s, could be seen as a precursor of current alternative visions for creating a sustainably built environment that responds to the age of unfettered globalisation and ecological crisis. Remarkably, as Pope Francis recently put it, living in a time when the 'technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilise them without being dominated by their internal logic,' it has become 'countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology.'<sup>24</sup> In this regard, negotiating the demanding task of how to strike a balance between leading a purposeful and creative existence and the appropriate and non-harmful use of technology, while confronting the unfolding civilisational crisis, is a continuous aspiration of Kaszás's practice.

Not only in his investigation of homebuilding but also in his interest in the handcrafting of tools does Kaszás reach to anthropological traditions to scope out alternatives to the industrial model. An essential reference

21. Andrew Blauvelt, 'Preface,' in Andrew Blauvelt, ed., *Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2015), p.11.

22. Catherine Rossi, 'From East to West and Back Again: Utopianism in Italian Radical Design,' ed. by A. Blauvelt, *Hippie Modernism*, p. 59.

23. Ibid.

24. Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2015), p. 68.

here is the notion of *bricolage*, influentially theorised by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* in terms of an adaptive process-based attitude to the creative use of available materials. Lévi-Strauss draws the distinction between the engineer, who works with a set of 'raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project' and the heterogeneous 'universe of instruments' of the *bricoleur*, who 'makes do whatever is at hand' and works with 'the remains of previous constructions or destructions'.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, Kaszás's versatile approach to bricolage extends beyond the re-use of materials that will clearly be crucial for survival after the collapse, to the design of tools themselves, which would also be a necessity in a post-scarcity world, while in its widest sense bricolage could stand as a descriptor for his artistic attitude in general.

This is visible in the artist's works related to the concept of 'Cargo Cult,' a notion referring to the cultural misunderstandings and shifting of functions of objects that originated from the specific historical case of ritual practices that appeared across islands of Melanesia in the aftermath of the Second World War. At this time, the supplies delivered by planes to occupying armies stopped coming and the indigenous population started to build wooden planes in the hope of ensuring the future provision of 'cargo.' The cultural misconceptions that arise through the collision of technologically-advanced cultures with traditional societies is what was of interest to the artist here, prompting him to experiment with creating fictional archaeological objects such as *Future-ex* (2010). Mimicking the form of a supermarket trolley, but pointedly constructed out of willow weave in a manner similar to traditional wicker baskets, this cultural hybrid was given a pair of wooden skis rather than wheels. Through this surreal assemblage the artist speculated about the 'possible nostalgia' expressed by a 'future neo-primitive society' following the 'collapse of modern civilisation'.<sup>26</sup>

A comparable process was at stake in the installation *Mirage* (2013), which took a defunct water well erected at the former river port in Dunaújváros as a prototype for a new structure, assembled for a different purpose and setting. The well that ran dry during the decades of socialist decay was transformed into a water supply fountain by the addition of a standard blue oil barrel, which the artist placed on top of the life-sized copy. A clue to its new function can be found in the large white letters 'UN' inscribed on the barrel, which emphasise the humanitarian relief purpose suitable for distributing water to those in need. Interestingly, the bottom of the basin is decorated with a representation of Pangaea made from salvaged ceramic tile fragments. While on the one hand it is reminiscent of the earlier propagandistic use of ideological mosaics on Dunaújváros's public buildings, the image also suggests the shattering of the whole Earth as the water issue becomes a global problem. Furthermore, with the repurposing

---

25. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 17.

26. Interview with Tamás Kaszás, Budapest, 5 May 2016.

of an oil barrel as a water vessel, Kaszás draws attention to the intensifying geopolitical issues around the shortage of drinking water, also as a consequence of global warming caused by the relentless burning of fossil fuels. Along with climate change, the accelerating use of water in the Anthropocene has contributed to its increasing scarcity in some regions, which in addition to pollution of underground sources and social and political questions raised by its privatisation, mean that 'water availability could be one of the most pressing resource issues of the twenty-first century.'<sup>27</sup>

Another defining characteristic of our Anthropocene age is soil degradation as a result of erosion, loss of nutrient and organic content, as well as pollution that is either unintended when substances generated by environmental events enter the top layer of the earth, or deliberate when these substances are added to enhance the productivity of industrial agriculture. This mode of mass food production is both energy intensive and a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, which demonstrates once again the interconnectedness of all the factors in ecological crisis. As ecologist Rachel Carson warned in the early 1960s through her ominous scenario *Silent Spring*, not only does our 'agriculture-based life depend on the soil,' but equally 'the soil depends on life,' with its 'very origins and the maintenance of its true nature being intimately related to the living plants and animals,' when it was created through the 'interaction of life and non-life long aeons ago.'<sup>28</sup> Bringing the geological time perspective into the equation makes the issues of the traditional relation to the land and food production on the one hand and the incredible destructiveness of modern agriculture on the other, timely and relevant. Concomitantly, in Kaszás's practice the problematic of agriculture, food production, gardening and gathering are closely interlinked with social justice.

An appreciation of the lost or endangered value of the traditional relationship to the land also lies behind Kaszás's extensive interest in peasant cultures, which offer a model for how to survive and prosper independently of oil-dependent technologies and economic systems. He also frequently examines in his work the peasants as a political subject, both in terms of their potential for taking on a future revolutionary role and through the repressed past of peasant revolts throughout history, often glimpsed through the distorting prism of communist-era instrumentalisation of such struggles. In the banner *Peasant Procession* (2011) for example, he revisits Hungarian left wing artist Gyula Derkovits's series of woodcuts from the late 1920s dealing with the bloody denouement of the Hungarian Peasant Revolt of 1514 that were much praised and reproduced during the socialist era. This notoriously violent rebellion in fact followed the typical course of the periodic uprisings that have flared up across Europe 'for upward of

---

27. Mark Whitehead, *Environmental Transformations: A Geography of the Anthropocene* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 31.

28. Rachel Carlson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 61.

a thousand years,' during which after a brief moment of 'complete freedom' peasant revolts usually 'ended in massacres.'<sup>29</sup> In Kaszás's version, Derkovits's motif of determined peasant rebels brandishing pitchforks and scythes is repeated again and again along on a roll of brown paper, suggesting the continuity of peasant protests through history and the relevance of their struggles to the present day.

In another related work, agricultural implements with a double use as improvised tools of struggle are transformed into poles for flags bearing the insignia of peasant rebellion. For these, the artist selects symbols that resonate with the uprisings of the late – medieval and early – modern period, including an interpretation in red and green of the peasant shoe or *Bundschuh* under which the localised rebellions of the German Peasant War of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries marched in protest against excessive taxes, arbitrary justice, the condition of serfdom and the nobility's monopoly of hunting and fishing rights. Another flag, with a black goose on one side and a white swan on the other, refers to the prophecy of the 15<sup>th</sup> century martyr Jan Hus, who before being burned at the stake predicted that although they were going to 'burn a goose,' a hundred years later the oppressors would be faced with a 'swan that could neither be roasted nor boiled.' A third shows a giant peasant woman skewering a tiny man, echoing the earthy humour of such revolts. The final flag strays from both traditional millenarian imagery and, for that matter, the symbolic repertoire of socialist propaganda, by depicting a sheaf of corn metamorphosing into a revolutionary fist.

From today's perspective, the catalogue of peasant rebellions can also be understood as a series of unheeded warnings about the social costs of the economic and cultural transformation wrought by the capitalist system, both historically and in relation to more recent post-colonial struggles. In the wake of widespread disillusionment with the un-kept promises of neo-liberal globalisation following the financial crisis of 2008, attention has also been directed to the writings of non-mainstream economists such as Karl Polanyi, who at the end of the Second World War developed a powerful critique of the 'Great Transformation' of pre-industrial societies. His insight that the historical move to separate 'labour from other activities of life and to subject it to the laws of the market was to annihilate all organic forms of existence'<sup>30</sup> could be taken counterfactually as an affirmation of pre-capitalist forms of social organisation and their value as models for the future development of society on non-capitalist lines. Furthermore, in his discussion of 'market and nature,' he described the decision to isolate and 'form a market for land' as perhaps the 'weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors,' contrasting this with the more traditional arrangement in which 'land and labour are not separated; labour forms part of life, land remains

---

29. Yves Fremion, *Orgasms of History: 3000 Years of Spontaneous Insurrection* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2002), p. 16.

30. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 171.

part of nature, life and nature form an articulate whole.<sup>31</sup> Correspondingly, Kaszás's anthropological interest in the much-maligned peasantry ultimately derives from the highly contemporary intuition that within traditional lifestyles, worldviews and resistance strategies can be found the seeds for a future social and economic order based on social equality, freedom and a more caring relationship to the natural world.

The urge to leave behind the 'inherited vision of economy' as 'individualised, monetised, rational-maximising calculation' that is separate from social, political and the ecological domains, in order to 'rethink and re-enact the relationship between economy and ecology' has been expressed as prerequisite for ethical living in the Anthropocene.<sup>32</sup> Envisioning 'community economies' that would be suitable for more sustainable ways of existence involves negotiating issues around participation and interdependencies of all constituents, the provision of needs necessary for survival, the fair distribution of natural gifts, as well as inclusion into the commons of all the species with whom we share the planet.<sup>33</sup> Such ethical micro-economies correspond with Kaszás's vision of post-collapse survival. These ideas could be encountered in the graphic sheets such as *Farming on the Golf Course* (2014), where vegetables are being grown on the grounds, while the hand cart is used not for carrying the putters and wedges, but for hoe, pick, rake and scythe instead. Similarly, a freshly picked red radish is held up in protest on another image, while a further agitational drawing depicts a fist full of seeds rather than petrodollars, undoubtedly pointing out where the real wealth is.

The assemblage *Apotheosis of the Fertile Land* (2016) that the artist considers as a constructivist relief consists of a number of surfaces layered with collected images originating in watercolours, photographs, prints or packaging materials on the subject of agriculture. References to peasant uprisings are juxtaposed here with empty packets of industrial cereal products and illustrations of agricultural machinery, while the foreground is dominated by a wreath reminiscent of the coat-of-arms of the former Soviet states. Although cleaned up from the ideological insignia, with no red stars in sight, the green wreath surrounded with depictions of various types of grains still stands as a symbolic allusion to the immense agricultural reforms under Stalin that were achieved through ruthless collectivisation campaigns and industrialisation. In that way, the peasant became 'the rural proletarian' who was 'working the fields that stretched to the horizon with modern machines,' and was surveilled through Machine Tractor Stations, which were 'not only central distribution points of equipment, but also the

---

31. Ibid., p. 187.

32. J. K. Gibson-Graham and Ethan Miller, 'Economy as Ecological Livelihood' in *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose and Ruth Fincher (eds.), (New York: Punctum Books, 2015 ), p. 7.

33. Ibid.

Communist Party's eyes and ears of political control.<sup>34</sup> Reading between the lines of Kaszás's bright title reveals how deeply engrained is the power and illusory optimism of the socialist doctrine of progress.

Switching from the perspective concerned with collecting examples which help form historical consciousness about the wide reaching issues of land, food growing, organised agriculture and the revolutionary roles of peasants in social transformation, the artist also focuses in his work on envisioning practical solutions to elemental questions of survival. The multifarious project *Famine Food* that is ongoing since 2011 could be a case in point, as it consists of drawings, prints, images and other visual aids and objects, which deliver useful information about edibles that can be found in times of need. 'Wild plants are invaluable during the time of famine or crisis,' according to Richard Mabey, the author of *Food for Free*, who explained that they are 'quickly available, tough, resilient [and] resistant to disease,' however they are also 'in danger of vanishing from popular knowledge.'<sup>35</sup> The task of preserving and reviving such endangered knowledge is in Kaszás's view a matter of engaging with the ecosystems and cultures of particular localities, as 'you have to know the local soil, local climate, local varieties of plants and local methods,' in order to accomplish 'what is practically real.'<sup>36</sup> Constructed accordingly is also the model of the *Gatherers' Pavilion* (2016) that is devoted to practical and theoretical advice about collecting wild foods, and conserving them for the times of famine and poverty.

Many of the concerns about practical issues of survival, which also entails striving for a higher quality of life, Kaszás explores in his collaborative practice with Anikó Loránt, with whom he has worked together under the heading *ex-artists' collective* since the early 2000s. Tellingly, the 'ex' stands in their name as signifier for their ambition to ultimately exit the institutional art world when the material conditions have been met for a slowed-down, ecologically-attentive practice in which art would not be separated from other activities of life.<sup>37</sup> Glimpses of such 'exercises in autonomy' are found in photographs, film clips and drawings that depict their family life on Szentendre Island, where they engage in gardening, cooking outdoors, collecting firewood or creating playful environments for children, to which they refer as *Auto-anthropology* (2010–16). It could be relevant here to recall Edmond Bordeaux Szekely, the influential theorist of Hungarian origin and experimentalist in natural living of Hungarian origin, who in his *Book of Survival* from 1978 apart from providing a practical guide to ecological

---

34. Paul Josephson, et al., *An Environmental History of Russia* (Cambridge, Cambridge: University Press, 2013), p. 95.

35. Richard Mabey, *Food for Free: A Guide to the Edible Wild Plants of Britain* (London: William Collins, 1972), p. 14.

36. Tamás Kaszás, 'A Tribal Way of Thinking' in Maja and Reuben Fowkes, (eds.), *River Ecologies: Contemporary Art and Environmental Humanities on the Danube* (Budapest: Translocal Institute, 2015), p. 119.

37. See: Maja and Reuben Fowkes, 'Tamás Kaszás's Art Laboratory: Anticipating Collapse, Practicing Survival,' (*Ars Hungarica* No. 3, 2013), pp. 379–391.

gardening also advocated 'individual and collective withdrawal from vast urban conglomerations, and a return to living in small communities where social relations again become meaningful and where the family can regain economic independence and control over the production of the main part of its food supply and other basic necessities.'<sup>38</sup> This scenario corresponds closely to the ethos of the ex-artists' collective, who by relocating to the rural periphery and seeking self-sufficiency could be perceived as setting an example for such attempts within contemporary art.

Their collective endeavours also include more classical artistic projects, such as designs for stained glass windows *Colours Are the Deeds of Light* (2007–16). This work sums up the artists' understanding of the interconnectedness of all the elements that constitute an ecosystem in which Earth's atmosphere, rocks, soil and water are interlinked with plants, animals and humans, while the title refers to Goethe's theory of colours. Goethe, who fused the artistic and scientific sides in his approach to natural world, was also influenced by his friend Alexander von Humboldt and his provident conception of 'nature as a web in which everything was connected.'<sup>39</sup> Such a holistic view of nature is present in organic patterns of the stained glass that also has the potential to serve as a greenhouse providing special qualities of coloured light for the growing of plants. As part of the installation, the artists also use living plants, specifically Morning Glory that not only swiftly grows and is particularly resilient, but is also known for the psychedelic properties of its seeds. Their stalks curl their way up lines of barbed wire, while an adjacent structure has been constructed for contemplation. This meditation could potentially lead from reflection on plants' adaptability to hostile conditions, to appreciation of the recent scientific verification that plants possess 'senses, can size up their territory, respond to threats, communicate, compete, remember.'<sup>40</sup>

Invitations for contemplation regularly appear in their work both as visual messages, as for instance in the poster that bears the banner 'Never Work/Contemplatio,' or by creating suitable furniture for taking a moment to reflect. One such handcrafted piece is the Leopold bench, based on the prototype invented by American conservationist Aldo Leopold, who never put on paper the actual design, but made use of scrap wood and any materials he had to hand. By the time his bench had been popularised, none of his own examples survived, which makes it even more adaptable and suitable for freer interpretation. Redefining the meaning of wilderness as a bio-diverse community, Leopold notably also wrote a pioneering work *The Land Ethic*, which in his view 'simply enlarges the boundaries of the community

---

38. Edmond Bordeaux Szekely, *The Ecological Health Garden: The Book of Survival* (Nelson: International Biogenic Society, 1978), p. 74.

39. Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (London 2015), p. 88.

40. Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 111.

to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.<sup>41</sup> By making Leopold benches, the artists are at the same time providing a spot to take a break as well as a space to reflect on the author's environmental legacy. What is more, in their practice contemplation is closely related to the notion of not working and taking time to slow down, resisting capitalist demands for efficiency and speed. The mode of 'slowness,' according to the-  
 orist Lutz Koepnick, makes it possible 'to experience the present aesthetically' and approach it as 'a site charged with multiple durations, pasts and possible futures,' in order to 'reflect on the now in all its complexity,' which is a challenging task in our unprecedentedly accelerated age.<sup>42</sup>

In the guidebook to the *Forest School* (2009), Tamás Kaszás proposes exercises with the forest that include the instruction to 'walk in the forest at springtime, slowly and as noiseless as possible... open all your senses and contemplate, observe how the forest is awakening.'<sup>43</sup> It is in the forest that the artist finds that the soil, plants, minerals, animals and humans are inseparably linked, while it also appears as a sanctuary from the coming economic and ecological crisis for a small community of survivors who 'learnt it deeply.'<sup>44</sup> The artist returns to the forest in a more self-reflective mode in a slide presentation from 2016 that loosely narrates an individual's attempted exodus from civilisation and search for refuge in the wilderness. The photographs depict fleeting encounters between the solitary survivor and the wild animals he meets, capturing brief episodes of mutual recognition across the species divide. The forest is also present here in ways that correspond to new perspectives of an 'anthropology beyond the human' that sets out to illuminate 'human relations to non-human beings' and understand how 'forests think.'<sup>45</sup> What also may be said to pass between humans and other species today are presentiments of, respectively, guilt and reproach at the shrinking of the wilderness with the ruination of the Earth at the hands of the Anthropos. The indignation of the wild beast surprised in a forest clearing could also therefore be seen as another, post-human iteration of the defiance of the 'savage mind' in the face of the relentless advance of an Anthropocenic civilisation that is careless of the natural world.

Taking time to slow down and contemplate, to pay attention to the immediate community, natural surroundings and fellow species, is the way for Kaszás to redirect omnipresent fixations on swiftly moving trends of contemporary living and be alert instead to cosmo-political realities. Critical towards technological obsessions, he chooses to skip the era of 'great acceleration' that stormed the world since the post-war period, and concentrate on the activist and aesthetic legacy of the time that preceded it. Equally,

---

41. Aldo Leopold, 'The Land Ethic' in Mark J. Smith, (ed.), *Thinking Through the Environment: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 192.

42. Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 4.

43. Tamás Kaszás, *Waldshule: Forestschool Guide No. 1*, (self-published booklet, 2009).

44. Ibid.

45. Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 7.

rather than giving in unreservedly to the vested interests of contemporary science, the artist turns to the traditional knowledge bestowed on us from our ancestors, while also borrowing from the contemporary anthropological sources of indigenous communities. In his visions of the future, that will be starkly different from present, as there are no indications yet that the ecological and economical crises are taken seriously enough in order to change the course on which the civilisation is heading, it will be the adaptiveness of the bricoleur's approach that will come in handy. Reawakening the savage intuitions and testing out untamed creativity might be a way to undo some of the over-achievements of our Anthropocene age.