

All Familiar Characters

3.06—10.07.2022

I feel at home in the entire world wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.¹

Rosa Luxemburg

The hypnotic image created by Karolina Freino employs a simple, documentary storyline. Flames consume organic matter. The peaceful plot is created by the movement of declining, falling inflorescences, accompanied by the sound of flickering flames. The image of burning may evoke associations with the threat of fire, a dangerous situation and ultimate loss. However, the slow process of burning captured on film has a contemplative quality. It does not arouse anxiety; on the contrary – it allows us to suspend our train of thought and concentrate on the phenomenal spectacle. A beautiful landscape with a disaster in the background.

The torches, smouldering at a steady pace, were made of mullein plants, perennials of wide medicinal use, rich in symbolism connected mainly with the sun and light. Found by the artist on the slope of a wasteland, the over twenty representatives of the species seem to resemble silent, expressive figures. In Slavic folk culture, of which we know so little today, *Dziewanna* (Polish for mullein) was the goddess of nature – the patroness of the cycle of rebirth, harvest and vitality associated with the changing seasons. In pre-Christian times, long, waxed or tallow-soaked inflorescences were used to make candles protecting against all evil, and were part of funeral ceremonies. Although one might think that the dry plants are burning like today's world brought to an edge, the scene is not overwhelming with hopelessness.

Mullein is a low-maintenance ruderal plant that grows freely on ground spoiled by human activity. Its vital force is reflected in the will to grow and the impressive size it can reach on relatively poor soil. An example of this may be the specimen that Rosa Luxemburg found in the yard of the prison in Kleczków, Wrocław. She was detained there between 1917 and 1918 for her anti-war activities and opposition to German imperialism. At that time, she sought solace in studying botany, her primary and true passion. She collected the plants in her herbarium from the closest accessible area or received them from relatives. In letters sent from prison to her friends, she often describes the joy she derives from connecting with insects, bird song or looking at the greenery through the window bars. The title of the exhibition, and of Karolina Freino's work, comes from an excerpt from a postcard in which she captures the subjectivity of vegetation: *Before I sat down to read, I naturally scanned the trees and shrubs in the park – they were all familiar characters, which I confirmed with satisfaction. On the other hand, my contacts with people are ever less satisfying.*²

Rosa's special concern for flora and fauna was expressed not only in scientific analyses of systematic or taxonomical issues presented on the pages of the herbarium. 'The second most famous Polish woman after Marie Curie-Skłodowska' was also interested in the environmental changes resulting from industrialisation. In a letter from 1917 to her friend Sophie Liebknecht, Rosa compares the natural nesting and feeding grounds of song birds, disappearing due to the spread of scientific forestry, horticulture and agriculture, with the situation of the indigenous inhabitants of North America. She observes the similar fate of humans and animals, because in both cases *they have been gradually driven from their hunting grounds by civilised men.*³

Although the historical, geopolitical and social context as well as the language used by the author of these words have changed, the cited parallel seems not so much to be still relevant, as to explore the archaeology

¹ R. Luxemburg, as cited in P. Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action*, Chicago 2010, p. 188.

² Postcard to Sophie Liebknecht dated 7 July 1916. R. Luxemburg, *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis*, Berlin 1922, p. 11; own translation.

³ Letter to Sophie Liebknecht dated 2 May 1917, Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1917/05/02.htm>.

of the buzzword concept capitalocene. On another occasion, the activist of German and Polish social democracy writes about capitalism: *the very condition of continuous improvements in labour productivity as the most important method of increasing the rate of surplus value, is the reproduction of capital and its social setting unrestricted utilisation of all substances and facilities afforded by nature and soil. To tolerate any restriction in this respect would be contrary to the very essence of capital, its whole mode of existence.*⁴ The sensitivity that emanates from her letters, consisting in the recognition of the needs of all beings, has often been dismissed by biographers as a sign of feminine sentimentalism and romanticism. It is precisely this concern for the human and non-human actors with whom we share the world that can offer an important guideline, serving not so much to make us aware of the hopeless position we find ourselves in as humanity, but rather to try to overcome the paralysing fear of catastrophe.

The last dated page of Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium quoted by Karolina Freino was written on 15th October 1918, that is exactly three months before the activist's assassination. A symptomatic coincidence – her death took place in the post-World War I era, a new chapter in world history. Today we would say: the most turbulent and uncertain period, marked by constant crises. The contemporary reality overshadowed by an unthinkable environmental catastrophe raises awareness of the need for change. However, a sense that it is already too late for that becomes easily apparent. We are witnessing a domino effect that dates back to the 19th century, or perhaps even the Neolithic Revolution. Three leaves glued on a sheet of yellowed paper refer to a three-channel video installation in which the burning mullein plants possibly initiate a new rite of passage towards radical hope, which is far from naïve. On the contrary, it arises from the gravity of the situation and is linked to a crisis of imagination. The mullein may symbolise an inner strength and engagement with the world, a conviction that the future may not yet be decided. That is, of course, as long as we do everything in our power first to prevent further degradation, to keep scenarios and horizons open.

Text by Joanna Kobyłt

⁴ R. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, London and New York 2003, pp. 337–8.

Video duration: **28'20"**

Herbarium card inscription:

Lichtnelkenarl. Königskerze

Verbascum lychnitis

aus dem Wirtschaftshof Kletschkastr.

15.10.18

White Mullein

Verbascum lychnitis

from the yard of the Kleczków Prison

15.10.18

The film's executive producer: Yanki Film

Camera: Przemysław Chojnacki, Krystian Stępień, Jakub Stypuła

Sound: Michał Matusz

Editing, colour grading: Przemysław Chojnacki

Film set security: Volunteer Fire Brigade in Wisznia Mała

Botanical consultation: Zygmunt Dajdok, Małgorzata Piszczek

Curator: Joanna Kobyłt

Exhibition production: Joanna Sokalska

Exhibition assembly: Tomasz Koczoń, Michał Perucki, Marcin Szalwa

Visual identification: Ania Witkowska

Audience development: Czarek Wicher

Photograph of the page from Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium courtesy of the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw.

The herbarium's location: Central Archives of Modern Records, Rosa Luxemburg's files, ref. 63/III/2.

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