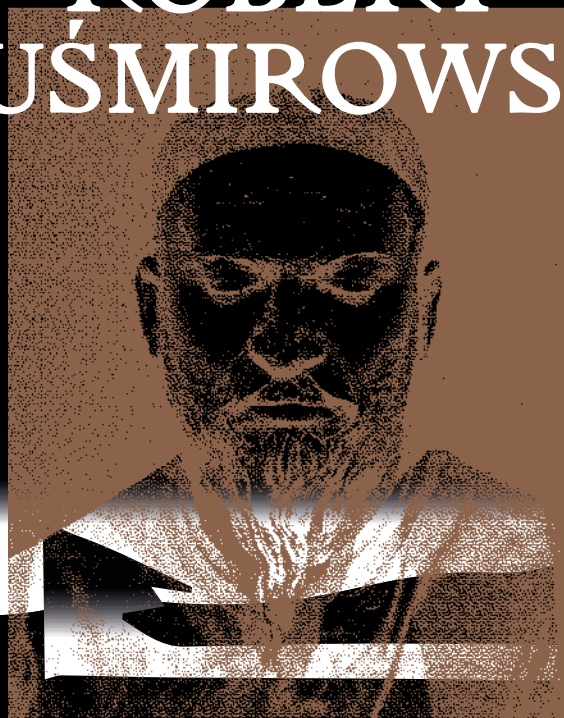


THIRTY TO TOMORROW

ROBERT
KUŚMIROWSKI







**ROBERT
KUŚMIROWSKI**

with:

Marek Chlanda, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, Krzysztof „Leon” Dziemaszkiewicz,
Jan Gryka, Mikołaj Smoczyński, Maciej Świeszewski, Daniel Zagórski

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KANTOR
AND KUSMIROWSKI

ARCHITECTS
ON
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HISTORY



1

Magdalena Link-Lenczowska
Natalia Zarzecka







KANTOR AND KUŚMIROWSKI – ARCHAEOLOGISTS ON THE GARBAGE HEAP OF HISTORY

The **Thirty to Tomorrow** exhibition has been born of multithreaded relationships between artists, curators, time and space. It also marks the culmination of Robert Kuśmirowski's road to Cricoteka – a venue dedicated amongst others to an unbroken dialogue between the legacy of its patron and those themes in modern art that add to the shared experience of it – and his direct encounter here with Tadeusz Kantor.

Many are the artistic analogies between these two creators who were first presented side by side by Hanna Wróblewska and Sabine Folie at an exhibition they curated, **The Impossible Theatre. Performativity in the Works of Paweł Althamer, Tadeusz Kantor, Katarzyna Kozyra, Robert Kuśmirowski and Artur Żmijewski**, first staged in 2005 at Kunsthalle in Vienna, and then moved to Barbican Centre in London and Zachęta in Warsaw. It was unfortunate that Cricoteka's poky rooms scattered across Kraków could not house the show. And so we are now more than content that Tadeusz Kantor and Robert Kuśmirowski have been able to meet again, in the new seat of our institution, offering optimum conditions for exhibiting art.

A particularly significant encounter of the two artists, in relation to **Thirty to Tomorrow**, took place in 2016, in Prato, Italy, at the opening of the new premises of the Centre for Contemporary Art Luigi Pecci. Inaugurating the Centre and curated by Fabio Cavallucci, **The End of the World** assembled works by eminent international artists, including Robert Kuśmirowski and Tadeusz Kantor. Still, the numerous “ends of the world” in the pieces of both creators do not seem to push tomorrow beyond the bounds of possibility.

Some other but not less distinguished artists partake in **Thirty to Tomorrow**; their individual stories, experiences, interests and, first and foremost, themselves – exceptional people – are the marrow of the show. Involved in the exhibition are Marek Chlanda, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, Krzysztof “Leon” Dziemaszkiewicz, Jan Gryka, Maciej Świeszewski and Daniel Zagórski, as well as Bartłomiej Jarmoliński and Artur Trojanowski who delivered performance acts during the opening.

The exceptionality of this exhibition is not only confirmed by the great choice of artists but also by the relations that developed as it was taking shape. Both, as an exhibition and a performative event, **Thirty to Tomorrow** is more than anything a process or, still better – the process becomes the artistic material of the presentation, exploring questions of memory, time and uncertain future.

In his *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine* (Brief Treatise on Serene De-Growth),⁽¹⁾ Serge Latouche provides a critique of the imperative for growth in the capitalist sense, a peculiar – as he calls it – “toxic addiction” of *homo oeconomicus* that infiltrates our daily lives and manifests as compulsive consumption behaviours – from accumulating normal goods, via workaholism to resorting to prostheses of emotions whose balance has been upset by the fluid profit-seeking modernity: stimulants and antidepressants. This kind of logic takes its toll not only on people but also on tradition, memory, history, identity and objects which serve the function of their conveyors. The primary purpose of goods produced at the lowest economic cost – and at an enormous human cost, it must be added – is to become objects of market transactions. In the vicious circle of the circulation of goods subjected to programmed accelerated aging, objects are meant to lose their functionality as soon as possible and end up at a garbage heap, under a layer of fake snow from polystyrene packaging, to make room for new ones that shine so luringly.

In this sense, Robert Kuśmirowski is one of the first contemporary partisans in Polish art of the de-growth revolution postulated by Latouche. By positioning materiality in the centre of his work, the artist performs a *reconquista* of reality, preparing for us – castaways of virtuality – a haven within its concrete nature. In this way, the creator encourages the viewers to rediscover and verify themselves in contact with the most fundamental level of existence. In his line of thought, he thus approaches Tadeusz Kantor’s idea of consistent employing, in his pictures, plays and performances, objects – turning them into objects of art – stripped of the dignity of their primary functions, worn-out and despised, as carriers of stories, some of them highly personal. Analogically, Kuśmirowski has been occupying the role of an unwearied archaeologist excavating history’s garbage heap from the beginning of his artistic career. He stubbornly returns to the past, with a characteristic lack of faith in it belonging to what once was, separated by a thick dividing line from a brand new present. On the contrary, in his work past events assume the form of their own shadows – dilapidated, rusted, mouldy or burnt, but still bearing witness – they enter contemporariness, even if the absolute reality of their status is an object of creative questioning. The same will apply at **Thirty to Tomorrow** to the reconstruction of the once-German aristocratic parlour in the **Träumgutstraße** installation, an armchair subjected to decadent transmutation by time and nature for years in the artist’s yard, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer’s bathroom burnt in an unfortunate

1 S. Latouche, *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, Fayard/Mille et une nuits, 2007.

accident, or the forgotten, humble everyday objects Kuśmirowski came across in Cricoteka's storerooms as he was preparing the exhibition and gradually included them into it.

In this way, the exhibition becomes a dialogue of objects and, as a result, of orders – the great history and private narratives, and art mediating between them, a conversation between Kuśmirowski, the artists he invited to participate and Kantor, and finally a discussions with the established patterns of thinking about gallery space and exhibition as such. Assuming the role of a great processor, the artist transforms a tanker into a tank, installs a symbolic window – Maciej Świeszewski's painting **The Dead Class** – between **Thirty to Tomorrow's** white cube and the adjacent labyrinth of the **Tadeusz Kantor. Spectres** exhibition and, last but not least, brings in nature to create new borderlines. He also leaves it up to the visitors to match keys to the rooms in which our shared future is to be found, what is yet to come. This is like an invitation extended to them to be part of a conspiracy in a cultural microrevolution which, according to Latouche's famous 8 Rs, instead of running down in the race of unrelented production of new things, will rethink reality, reconceptualise its roots, reutilise what we unrightly call rests, or reevaluate apparently modern values which, in relation to contemporary challenges, are paradoxically closer to yesterday than tomorrow.

The diligent processing of material reality as an objective and basic raw material, performed by Kuśmirowski, is in this context also a gesture meant to reconstruct social communities lost in the non-memory of the eternal now. These, regenerating upon the foundation of conscious de-growth, can be useful in restoring the dignity of what is political in its most basic dimension. ×













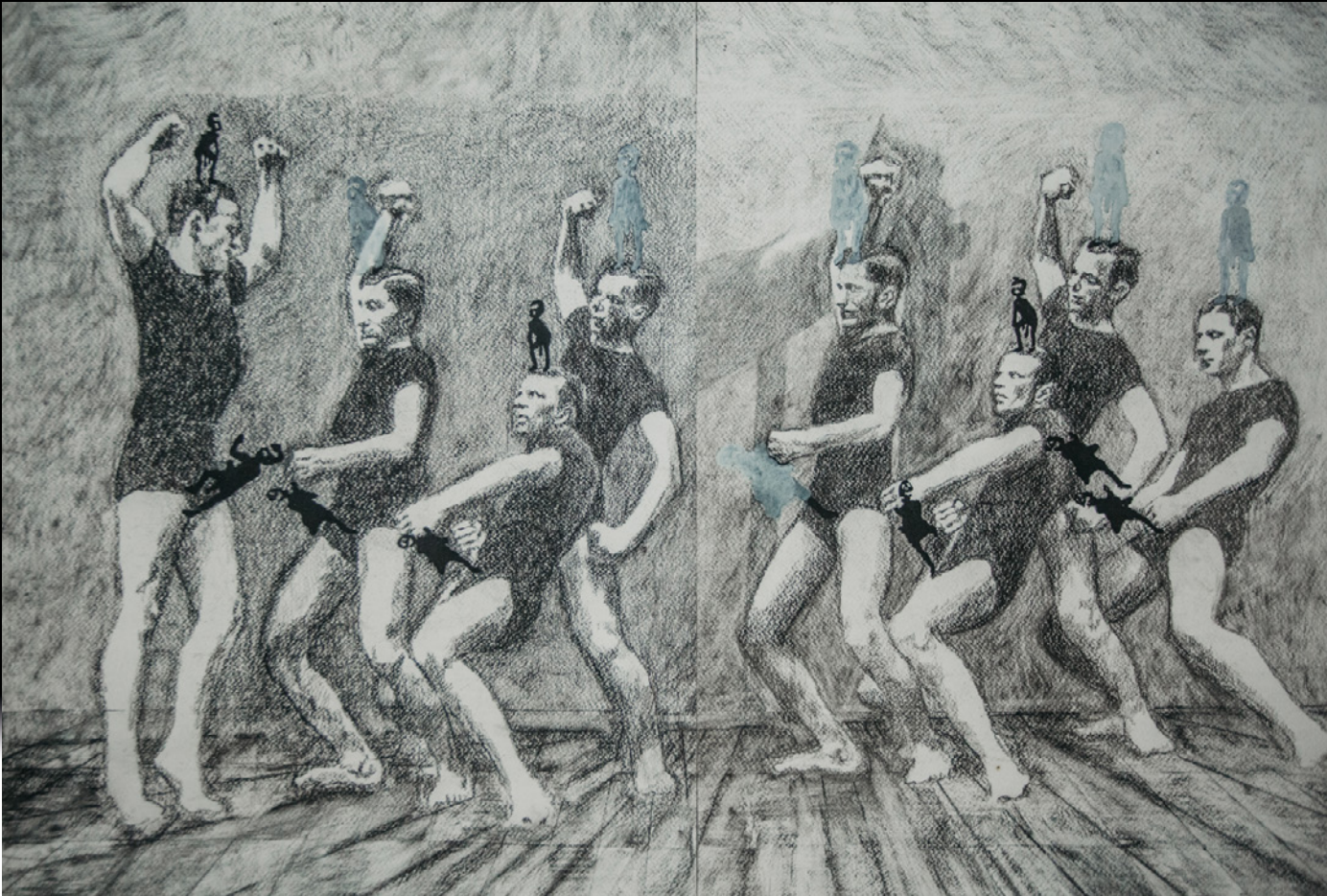






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OF RUINS AND THINGS



2

Magdalena Ujma







RUINS OF

THINGS

THE FEVER OF MEMORY

We get from Robert Kuśmirowski what is familiar to us, and comforting; his works are like the songs we have known for a long time. He draws upon collective memory, evoking nostalgia for a bygone era and eliciting the exclamation: “yes, this is exactly what it used to like!” The workings of memory never change: better days always belong to the past. The air used to be cleaner (or, at least, we once lacked the knowledge about the levels of its pollution), people had more time on their hands, and social occasions *really* rocked. Let us quote Świetliki’s *Finlandia*: “A summer like this will never come again / The Sun will never rise and set in such a lovely way / The Moon will not hung so beautifully again / There’ll be no TV like this / Or such colourful magazines again.” We should keep in mind as well that the past beauty of things was doomed to deterioration. The bad future of the past flashed above the horizon.

Kuśmirowski embarked on his artistic career when so-called memory turn dominated the humanities. A new millennium had just begun. Vestiges of the past, troublesome for former authorities, were being vigorously unearthed across Poland, blanks in local histories were being accounted for. The memory of Jewish estates and districts, once razed to the ground, was released through painstaking efforts undertaken by activists in cities and in towns, the German past of Western and Northern Poland was being revealed. Significantly, in their work with memory humans were aided by objects. More often than not, a fresh look at a well-known item gave a stimulus for digging into memory. Used by consecutive generations, featuring in childhood memories across the North and the West, worn-out and all too common, they unexpectedly disclose a face that appears nothing less than strange: the underside of a bowl carries the swastika symbol,⁽¹⁾ old familiar duvets and eiderdowns were once used by some strangers in Wałbrzych, Szczecin or Gdańsk, but also in Kraków, Lublin and Kielce.⁽²⁾ The objects-signs of the past, frequently kept in an exposed place, have gained the power to speak.

¹ See K. Kuszyk, *Poniemieckie*, Wołowiec 2019, p. 9-12.

² See e.g. A. Zborowska, *Życie rzeczy w powojennej Polsce*, Warszawa 2020, p. 147: *Poles arriving in the Regained Lands after the war must have realised the origins of the objects they found in houses and public buildings, in basements, backyards or even in the streets.*

All this was accompanied by the firmly rooted anxiety experienced by hundreds and thousands of people displaced by the war and soon after the war, survivors and repatriates, at the thought of Germans and Jews returning to reclaim their property. Things left behind had been looted, captured, confiscated, stolen or acquired by remaining residents or the so-called immigrant population in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. When Kuśmirowski was a child, Poles were beginning to travel to Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania where they discovered new “Atlantises,”⁽³⁾ traces and ruins of the once glorious Polish culture. At last, the experiences of millions of people of various nationalities who had experienced expatriation, displacement and the loss of everything they owned could be discussed.

3 The word “Atlantis” is widely used in Polish culture in relation to Eastern territories in Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus. See e.g. the cycle by S. S. Nicieja, “Kresowa Atlantyda. Historia i mitologia miast kresowych”, v. I–XVI, Opole 2012–2021.

I mention the collective experience of war because – so it seems to me – Kuśmirowski’s work conveys the notion of a general fragility of things. Compulsive copying and multiplying of objects seem to be the artist’s way of checking whether they really exist, as though he were not sure of the fact. Anyway, the turn towards history in Polish culture described above has left a deep mark on visual arts. According to Izabela Kowalczyk, it was manifested in “the interest in recent history, and chiefly the issues related to the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Polish-Jewish and Polish-German relationships, relocations as well as the days of the Polish People’s Republic and struggles for independence”.⁽⁴⁾ It should be stressed that this rather universal turn towards history was consciously used by the ruling right-wing party that seeks legitimisation for its actions in the past. The first Law and Justice government introduced a purposefully developed history-oriented approach to policy-making (apparent, for instance, in the *Patriotism of Tomorrow* scheme implemented by the Ministry of Culture). In Warsaw, the first decade of the 21st century witnessed the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum, the commencement of the construction of the POLIN Museum as well as the emergence of many other institutions dedicated to history.⁽⁵⁾

4 I. Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości*, Warszawa 2010, p. 13.

5 On the interest in history see also, e.g.: A. Szczerski, *Transformacja. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989 roku*, Kraków 2018, and chiefly Chapter IV *Patrząc w przeszłość*, pp. 85–104.

A majority of new historical museums relied on illustrative, interactive and narrative contents but, later on, some institutions decided to focus on objects. **The Things of Warsaw** exhibition at the Museum of Warsaw exemplifies this. Things are no different in Kuśmirowski’s work: it is objects that count, and sometimes the relationships between them.

EMPTY OBJECTS

The artist has mastered the idiolect of things inherent in our culture. He learned about their status in the Polish People’s Republic, and witnessed the revolutionary changes in the way they were treated brought by the turn of the 1989. Initially, he took a practical approach. “What I couldn’t get I had to make by myself” – he said.⁽⁶⁾ Such life philosophy was very typical of a childhood spent

6 M. Branicka, *Robert Kuśmirowski*, [in:] *Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej po 2000 roku*, Warszawa 2007, p. 370.

in the Polish People's Republic, a time when poverty taught us all to "make do with nothing," to cope with general shortages. The artist was as resourceful as anyone in those days. Not available, how come? Everything can be done at home, exchanged, cultivated, died, sewn, built. That is why such trendy imports from the West as the postmodern bricoleurs or DIYers and the zero waste lifestyle that emerged in response to ecological disaster are hardly a novelty to us. We have seen it all on a daily basis in people's democracies.⁽⁷⁾

7 Resourcefulness within the context of war-time and post-war looting is discussed e.g. by A. Zborowska, op. cit., p. 113 ff.

8 M. Branicka, op. cit.

9 Ibidem.

It soon turned out that Kuśmirowski wanted more than "monthly travelcards for the family or the Polish Youth Hostel Association Membership Card".⁽⁸⁾ The young artist got down to copying things that failed to generate profit, such as "labels of Gouda cheese from Leclerc, the issue of "Trybuna Ludu" dated 29th May 1981, a pre-war 100-mark note and a Certificate in Welding Training issued for Kazimierz Szpunar in 1942",⁽⁹⁾ as enumerated by Monika Branicka. Kuśmirowski's approach to copying revealed a less obvious facet of the method. It seemed to have given expression to the medium itself, the mastery of execution in itself: the skill at producing fictitious documents that pretend to be real and look like real ones, as well as larger objects or, in time, more and more complex forms, sets, systems and collections. It took him little time to recognise the possibilities offered by the technique of copying for *falsifying the past*, as Branicka calls it. This term was used by the critic to describe the production of (impossible) copies of things that were never there. To sum up: since 2002, when his work was first put on display, Kuśmirowski has passed from copying documents via staging foot or cycle trips in the old style, making imitations of machines, cemeteries, photo parlours, to an underground bunker, library, scientific laboratory or a collection.

Objects have their own identities shaped by their functions and material nature. Expensive and hard to get, they may turn into fetishes, objects of desire and status symbols. In Poland, cars, houses and gardens are the symbols of social position. Elsewhere, it could be bags, shoes, feathers or watches. Other things such as, for instance, second-hand clothes until recently, are held in disdain. And lastly, there is a vast group of items whose being there and the services they provide to us are so obvious that they are never spoken about. They only capture our attention *by some sort of disturbance or interruption*. When objects are not where they are supposed to be, or are malfunctioning, they become conspicuous to us, points out the archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen.⁽¹⁰⁾ In 20th-century Poland, shortages and defective things were commonplace. The fears they fuelled, the aspirations and dreams they evoked, their material and cultural status are all reflected in Kuśmirowski's work. When he presents a collection of real, though old, toys assembled by the Sosenko family, and nearby remains of workshops-laboratories buried in earth, when he reconstructs a 19th-c photo parlour, when he builds a graduation tower-storehouse full of clutter or a giant

10 B. Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archeology and the Ontology of Objects*, Lanham 2010, p. 72.

stronghold with bookshelves lining its interior walls, he invariably shows the cultural significance of those objects (workshop, stronghold, collection – their individual stories and the changes they have been through across the ages) on the one hand, and on the other their materiality undergoing degradation.

Here is an excerpt from a book by Andrzej Stasiuk, the eulogist of things left behind, shaking off their meanings along with consecutive layers of flaking paint: “matter in its final collapse and desolation:⁽¹¹⁾ when things deteriorate [...] a void appears which is then filled with other things.⁽¹²⁾ Or elsewhere: all things invisible have been forced into wooden, stone, spatial and colourful forms, and the rest were [...] pieces of fictions strung [...] onto real stems, like candyfloss wrapped round a wooden stick”...⁽¹³⁾ These words make it plain that life is impossible without things, and that emptiness, lack and absence are instantly refilled. But the final destination of objects is the emptiness they keep trying to escape.

Kuśmirowski senses this void. He makes copies of non-existent originals “because the point of reference is no longer there”.⁽¹⁴⁾ The 2004 piece called **D.O.M.** is a cemetery moved into an art gallery. Or it seems like one, at least. It is an assemblage of time-worn tombstones hidden behind a metal gate. A forgotten evangelical graveyard in the village of Końskowola served as a model. The original cemetery was the burial place of German settlers. There was nothing durable in Kuśmirowski’s work, stone was an illusion, and the gravestones at the exhibition were empty, made of polystyrene and cardboard.⁽¹⁵⁾

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

Kuśmirowski’s vocabulary does not come from the world of modernism. The artist may be drawing from modernity, and he can do the same with other poetics, but the true language of the art has its origin elsewhere. Branicka claims that the key to Kuśmirowski’s work are “the cheerless provinces where the past is synonymous with the present”.⁽¹⁶⁾ Modernism relies on new objects with new functions and uses, designed items with a programmed vision of a new world and new humans they are meant to shape by making them perform specific activities. The provinces contain objects destroyed by time, old and kept for decades.

It was the provinces that provided Kuśmirowski with ideas and ways to implement them. Characteristic of them are silence, motionlessness, boredom, lack of perspectives and events, poverty, backwardness. Places one can only escape from, and should one remain – one dies while still alive. The motionless provinces are dead. And death is the halting of time. This numb, frozen time is present in Kuśmirowski’s works. Or time that has stopped to progress, bringing destruction, decay and decomposition instead. It is worth mentioning that such a negative idea of regions far away from the centre provides a fairly good picture of their current state and the way they are perceived in contemporary Poland. People who still live

11 A. Stasiuk, *Dukla*, Wołowiec 1997, p. 48.

12 Ibidem, p. 45.

13 Ibidem, p. 59.

14 A. Szczerski, op. cit., p. 89, note 12, the author quotes from Jean Baudrillard’s *The Precession of Simulacra*.

15 Ibidem p.

16 M. Branicka, op. cit., p. 370.

17 See e.g. M. Szymaniak, *Zapaść. Reportaże z mniejszych miast*, Wołowiec 2021.

18 B. Olsen, op. cit., p. 159.

19 Ibidem.

20 Ibidem, p. 160.

21 Ibidem, p. 161.

there, reporters and sociologists agree that small towns in Poland are dis-integrating and their situation is as bad as it can be⁽¹⁷⁾.

For the best part of the history of civilisation objects outlived their users by far. It is only these days that they are discarded before they can be used again. Historically, however, things remained relentless witnesses to the past. That something happened is evidenced not only by documents or stories but also by objects. They are like outliers or rocks emerging from the ocean of time. “Throughout human history, this reassurance of stability as the normal state of things can hardly be overstated”, claimed Bjørnar Olsen.⁽¹⁸⁾ He enumerated their properties, including solidity and durability “that make a vital difference to human life: not only to society and social bonds, but also to our existential security”.⁽¹⁹⁾ Things resistant to change are *things in place, being there*. These qualities allow “the gathering or sedimentation of the past”.⁽²⁰⁾ Present day is “a palimpsest of all durations of the past that have become recorded in matter”.⁽²¹⁾

The past is a kind of fiction, which is especially true about a place such as Poland where history is always being shaped like plasticine, and its versions are as numerous as opinions, points of view, places of residence and origin. And this is not a matter of marginal importance, the weight of imposing your version of past events is recognised, making a conclusion of memory-related struggles regarding the culprits and the victims unattainable. Conflict is born of Polish relationships with Jews, but also with Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Lemkos and Roma. Kuśmirowski refuses to take sides; his work seems to convey the message that all that remains of occurrences disappearing in the abyss of time is merely a blurred reflection found in what is still there, in debris, pieces, ruins. Throughout his career, the artist has many times “made available collections of assembled items, creating thought-out configurations, typologies, imitating museum procedures”, noted Marcin Lachowski.⁽²²⁾ These activities suggest that he attempts to provide a picture of a whole, a narrative.⁽²³⁾ In this, however, he achieves no success. By carefully putting objects together, placing side by side the “real” and the “fake,” the artist gives expression to a “premonition of death”, exposing the workings of “degradation and deflation of object”.⁽²⁴⁾

We live in a rubble of reality. Kuśmirowski does not celebrate the good old times. He celebrates the lack of faith in the original. Rather than relating a single version of history, he speaks of the catastrophe of a world that has disappeared. To him, memory is like a ruin, the remains of a picture. Szczerski claims that the artist falsifies the false.⁽²⁵⁾ Kuśmirowski places himself within his own illusionist procedures. His presence at an exhibition can be so illusionary that the viewers believe him to be... a drawing or a sculpture, rather than a living person acting as a component of his own work. ×

22 M. Lachowski, “Artysta jako kurator i kolekcjoner. O wystawach Włodzimierza Borowskiego i Roberta Kuśmirowskiego”, *Quart*, 1(59)/2021, p. 121.

23 This is why Andrzej Szczerski is wrong in claiming that Kuśmirowski fits into the narrative concept of history, op. cit., p. 88.

24 M. Lachowski, op. cit., p. 122.

25 A. Szczerski, op. cit., p. 90.





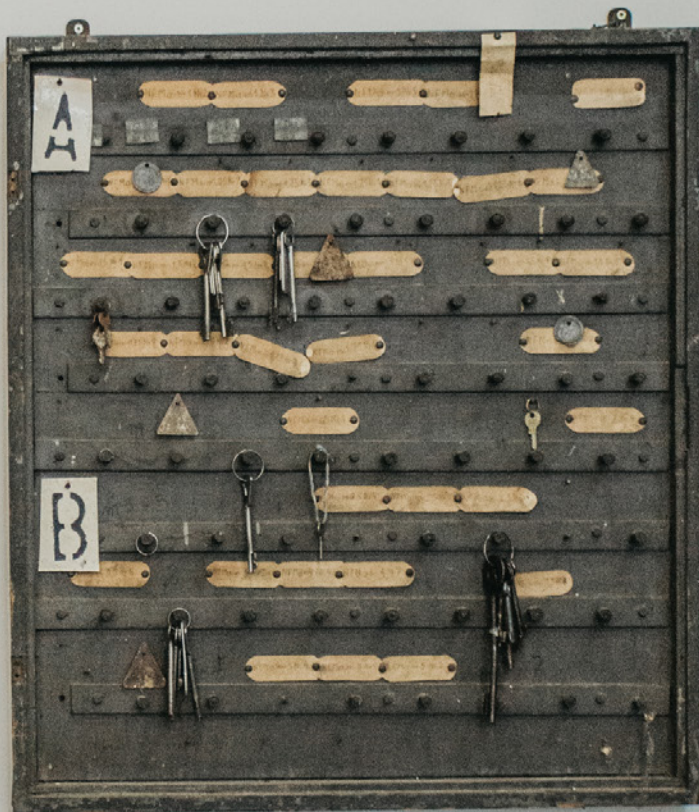












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4 MINUTES TO SAVE THE WORLD

3

Kamil Kuitkowski







4 MINUTES TO SAVE THE WORLD

23:53[🔥]

When thirteen years ago the Queen of Pop was joined by the ex of the Princess of Pop to sing that they only had four minutes to save the world [▶ watch the video](#), there was very likely no one who sincerely believed the situation was really grave. After all, things were not as bad as they are now. Though they could have been, actually, as yesterday tends to appear as a delightful and innocent time, free from worries over the future, childlike. Memory of the past is a construct rather than a hard fact. Perhaps, today will be remembered as a better time than we know it. Provided there will be someone to remember it knowing that, when I am writing this essay, several cultural institutions in Kraków have suspended their activity due to inundation, tornadoes have become a common occurrence in Poland, large areas of Europe are on fire, another piece of Arctic permafrost has disappeared, several species of animals have become extinct and websites are busy foretelling how much time we have left [▶ read the article](#). There is no need to mention the coronavirus pandemic – we have no idea when or how it is going to end. There are indeed reasons to be afraid. Everywhere there are signs that there might be no tomorrow, while psychologists diagnose climate depression and anxiety spectrum disorders caused by fear of destruction. But the fear of an approaching end is not new. It is an immanent feature of Christianity; the first Christians believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. Our culture has since announced quite a few bigger or smaller apocalypses, and countdowns to them have frequently been made the focus of attention.



Doomsday Clock settings in various periods of its existence:

initial setting	1947
first atomic bomb test in the Soviet Union	1949
India tests the Smiling Buddha nuclear weapon	1974
armed conflicts intensify, e.g. in Afghanistan, South Africa and Poland	1981
current setting	January 2021

But it was only the 20th-century culture that accepted the fact the apocalypse is not the end of all things, but merely a twilight of advanced human civilization. And although the title of the first post-apocalyptic novel belongs to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* ▶ [read the article](#), a book published in 1826, foretelling the end of humanity beaten by a pandemic, the real outburst of works depicting the world after its end came when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, marking the end of the Second World War. Two years later, the Doomsday Clock began to tick and the sound has been the loudest ever. The hands of the clock, invented by the Chicago-based *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* ▶ [read the article](#), with midnight indicating the final collapse, have been moved twenty-four times since then. And although today they are the closest to zero hour (100 seconds), it must be said that it was the Cold War and the fear of atomic annihilation that have produced descriptions of a civilization about to collapse or one already fallen that are the most intriguing. Apart from serving the obvious purpose of catharsis or providing the vanitas motif, this almost obscene spectacle of ruins and remains, devastated cities, frames of skyscrapers, overgrown motorways, monuments sticking out from the rubble, deserted houses and rotten furniture also reveals the fetishism of the past and the apparent notion that matter and materiality are sufficient to paint a picture of reality.

Absorption in objects and their disintegration is typical of the work of Robert Kuśmirowski, an artist using such materials as paper mâché, plaster of paris or polystyrene to create illusions of bygone things. It is enough to name a few of his pieces, starting from the 2004 installation called **D.O.M.** ▶ [read the article](#), originally displayed at the Johnen Galerie in Berlin, and then at the Fundacja Galerii Foksal in Warsaw, a highly veristic depiction of an abandoned graveyard with 18th and 19th-century-like tombstones and a decaying cemetery gate placed in a sterile white cube of a gallery. It is actually too realistic to be natural. **Träumgutstraße** ▶ [read the article](#), was created in 2014 for a show staged at the Salon Akademii Sztuk Pięknych in Warsaw, where the artist fit out an exhibition room with burnt and collapsing pieces of furniture typical of a bourgeois living room in the early 20th century, deserted after an unknown cataclysm. On the other hand, the massive installation titled **Stronghold** ▶ [read the article](#), made in 2011 at the Eleventh Lyon Biennale, in the hall of a former sugar factory La Sucrière, is both, an abandoned library filled with piles of rotting books and a workshop or a laboratory equipped with forgotten technology, enclosed in monumental architecture bringing to mind Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Apart from his fascination with decomposition, the artist also seems to be making attempts to save or recreate what has been or can be destroyed. Mostly, however, he builds a past recounted by the present (or even the future), as Kuśmirowski's works are not based on any originals. They are sophisticated simulacra.

In what he does, Kuśmirowski is rather like people inhabiting fallout shelters in Philip K. Dick's short story *The Days of Perky Pat* [▶ read the article](#), who fail to rebuild the world after an atom holocaust. They are satisfied with creating hyperrealist models of a consumptive El Dorado from the past for the eponymous Pat, a Barbie-like doll. Or like the Omega Man [▶ read the article](#) in the 1971 film adaptation of Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* [▶ read the article](#), the last heir of the cultural and intellectual legacy of humanity, trying to hide in a stronghold-tenement amongst works of art and luxury objects from his "muted" family eager to destroy everything related to civilization which they see as the source of the fall. The artist can also be compared to the monks in Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* [▶ read the article](#), who help recreate civilization by collecting finds from the days before the nuclear war as relics. In his preparations of the **Half Past Tomorrow** exhibition, Kuśmirowski may also resemble Professor Larsen from *Dead Man's Letters* [▶ read the article](#), a Nobel laureate hiding in the basement of a ruined museum with a group of children, refusing to accept that the end has come. That is because **Half Past Tomorrow**, made chiefly of rests, waste and remains discovered in Cricoteka storerooms, dialoguing with the permanent exhibition of Tadeusz Kantor's objects, is not only a story about the fear of destruction but also about the function of institutions, strategies of staging exhibitions and culture in general. The question that needs to be asked here is whether we need them in their current form, non-ecological and non-economic, oppressive in one way or another, but invariably and absolutely unavoidable. It is the structural umbrella they unfurl that makes it possible to combat fear in clinical conditions but also provides a chance of survival. It is not by coincidence that the Seed Vault built in the Arctics will be accompanied by one holding books [▶ read the article](#), because when, in Piotr Szulkin's *O-bi, O-ba. The End of Civilization* [▶ read the article](#), it was decided that the Bible should be searched through for the plans of the arc, it turned out the book had been minced to food long ago.

As this essay is being written, the **Half Past Tomorrow** exhibition is still to take its physical shape. Its premises have been clearly formulated; it is going to be constructed as a site specific work at the turn of September and October, just before the opening. That is when its final form and its usefulness in getting accustomed to the ticking of the clock will become known. ×

















MICROLIBERTY IN CAPTIVITY



4

**Robert Kuśmirowski in
conversation with Marcin Wilk**







MICROLIBERTY IN CAPTIVITY

MARCIN
WILK:

It's early June 2021. We're supposed to talk about *Half Past Tomorrow*, but this is still work in progress so I'll start by asking how far you've got. What arrangements have you been able to make with Andrzej Dudek-Dürer and Daniel Zagórski?

ROBERT
KUŚMIROWSKI:

Andrzej Dudek-Dürer is all for it, of course. Everything's being prepared. Yesterday, I had a conversation, rather long, with Daniel Zagórski, who's an immensely intriguing person. He said, at first: "Fight your own battle. Do your own thing." He wanted me to be specific about the exhibition. He told me he had neither energy nor time to waste on doing somebody else's things. But then I know that he has lots and lots of energy. It should be stressed that he's a person who spends 20 hours a day making art: sounds, images, drone photos. He's active in 3D, too. Young people – and he's 72! – can't keep up with him, they don't compare to him when it comes to certain skills. They don't even know half of what he does.

So I had this long talk with Zagórski. When he heard that the show was going to take place in Kraków, that I make music and am not planning on showing any pictures or photos, or printouts, but it's going to be about something we'd make ourselves – I mailed him some sounds and he googled a thing or two straight away – he decided he was interested, and open to discussion. But first we'll talk things over in the evening, in Łódź. That's presumably where it's going to be conceived. Or it'll crumble. Anything could happen with him. He's one dynamite person that – if something goes wrong – explodes. And the harm caused will be bilateral.

But for me, both Dudek-Dürer and Zagórski fit into this jigsaw. They are masters of image and artistic attitude. We could make a nice trio, perhaps.

MW: **What is this jigsaw to be like?**

RK: Each would get a chamber, room, space. Part like in psychiatric clinics, part like an interrogation room or a cell for convicted criminals who are kept under observation from morning to night to ascertain whether they are of unsound mind or not. All obtained clues allow an expert to assess their mental state. Either sound or unsound. I find the ambiguity of these chambers and the voyeurism captivating.

Dudek-Dürer would occupy a bunk bed I've made, and what is beneath the bed would remain invisible. Only his ground-floor piece of world would be on view. What is between the upper bed and the one below on which he sleeps. Pasted things, crazy drafts. Reading, in fact, from all those pieces of paper, photos, objects, pendants, beads. Because he's in transcendental meandres, too. It'd be a kind of the last opportunity to sneak a glance at wisdom.

So the first theme would be visual. That means Dudek-Dürer, Zagórski and I would be present at the opening at Cricoteka in those specially arranged and prepared chambers. This is how I see it but, as I've said, I'm still discussing things with Daniel. We'll see if I can get the idea through to him.

MW: **You said "the first theme." And the next?**

RK: Audio. We'll record some music for the closing of the show, each by himself. So there'll be three pieces on a chosen theme. And the theme is what we're yet to agree on. Will it be available to be listened to, accompanied by images, or will we enter the chambers once again and each will be accompanied by a composition, or will it be an audiovisual gig of sorts – I've no idea. This remains to be arranged, too. The main thing is that we are going to release those sounds later on. There'll be a material trace left. A cassette or a reel-to-reel tape. A reel-to-reel tape would be better perhaps. A load of collected scientific knowledge.

MW: **These interrogation rooms and cubbyholes you've mentioned bring a panopticon to mind, up to a point.**

RK: These ideas are not new, this is what the judiciary and prison systems rely upon. This is about compulsion, being convicted. On the other hand, the space is very private, intimate. But no new things will be allowed. Just the basic kit, occults that make it possible to live in enclosure. Microliberty in captivity.

MW: **So they are supposed to stay in the chambers. And you?**

RK: There's this portable device for growing mushrooms. It was once used by farmers, by moonshiners too. A water column is heated until it begins to evaporate. This process can be observed through a small opening. So I could only be seen through this opening. I saw this mushroom-growing thing somewhere in the Lubelszczyzna region. I need to find it now. I don't even know if we'd be able to carry it in. Perhaps I should buy, cut and weld it together again on site?

Alternative ideas: an arctic transformed into a beautiful house as the main object at the exhibition. But then also some wayside objects, things we pass by. A wooden mile marker bearing the sector number of a given stretch of road. A concrete fence, once used by railway or the army, with fitted barbed wire. I have an armchair, too, the kind people put on their porches, torn open by all kinds of weather. And there's a number of other objects I'd like to add.

And I've found a house. Not far from Otwock. It seems to have imploded inside, so it's really high time I spoke to the Polish Railways or someone, I wasn't able to notice the name of the owner as I was travelling by train, but it's not private property for sure.

MW: **Magda Ujma also told me that you'd like to use some objects from Cricoteka / Kantor.**

RK: I was in the museum not long ago and I looked through the rooms, store-rooms, even the ones holding contemporary objects, just to find out what there was to be used, what could come in handy – construction-wise, to be covered with plasterboard, if that'd turn out necessary. I saw things I could use as support for some pieces. I'm not going to use them in my work, but I did have the idea to use one of Kantor's pieces as a stimulus to some extension. It could be put on display with my own suggestion for the continuation of the original idea.

For example: a pram and a tap, and all at once they become a sink. This may be carried on, at least in terms of plumbing, by laying a system of pipes and a rusty boiler to collect the pressure. This system of pipes could be arranged ornamentally, enhancing the impact of the work. But this is just an example showing that this sort of clashes could increase the power of a work everyone knows or hardly knows because it has lost its attraction.

So I'm thinking: maybe it would be worth showing old crates or backs of Kantor's painting? They have never been on view. This'd also reveal the whole magic and nobleness of the unnobleness of stuff. Of course, all the greatest treasures are on permanent display...

MW: Well, continuation does sound intriguing.

RK: As we are talking now, I'm considering using small or flat objects. I don't know which particular ones or if I'll do this at all. The thing is I prefer to pass from object to installation. Then the object will no longer be an object but it will have been sort of absorbed into the installation. In this way, I take away its status as celebrity, but I also do this to demonstrate that, by making those objects, Kantor stimulated viewer's imagination and inspired them to complete the show by themselves.

On the other hand, I still don't seem to be fully aware of the fact that I'm going to be in Cricoteka. And this is a good thing because I'm unaffected by it, I'm not blocked or overexcited. It's simple – when I'm in the room, in Cricoteka – I just grasp all the things I need at the right moment. So, if there are displays and Kantor's old crates which will do better than classic displays, I use them. No gallery holds this kind of treasures.

MW: I was intrigued by this un-faming and re-faming of Kantor.

RK: This is important because of the transforming approach to art these days. There used to be three large exhibitions per year. People felt an urge to see them, and the things Kantor put on – not only events but also some objects used in those performances – turned into free objects, artefacts. And they kept on having effect. Today, when we have so much to choose from, we tend to forget about such works. My idea is to play them, but symphonically. The thing is to avoid staging a solo performance but – like a symphony – to play several dozen instruments that will generate at a given moment a single vibration, a harmony of sorts, that will pierce us.

MW: In 2015, in a conversation with Piotr Kosiewski published in the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly, you said that you considered Kantor to be “one of the most uncompromising artists I have ever known.” Do these words still stand?

RK: Yes, very much so. In fact, I realise that some things can be done at the same time. I can see, for instance, that we use constructions of a similar kind to mobilise this sort of art. I mean derelict things. Besides, hybridisation of objects, using a number of things to build a new one. Here we have a lot in common as well. And vanitas, the dead-being of things, he would revolve around that. His choice of actors with specific faces. So I have a natural feeling that Andrzej, Daniel and I must be present at the show. This encounter with Kantor has led me to discover that I would possibly act in a way akin to his ways, using a similar key in my choice of objects, building atmosphere, collaborating with wonderful people

RK: whose very appearance can be extremely eloquent about some troubling or public matters. These are possibly the strongest themes present here. One more thought: I'm knowledgeable about materials, and I appreciate and admire what Kantor was able to achieve in the conditions in which he worked. He was active at a time when everything was short. I don't know how much vodka one had to have and how many people one had to know to obtain what was needed. But this deprivation didn't stop him from creating, the way he combined things together was well-thought-out and impactful. He must have expressed what he cared about.

MW: **You talk about the things you share with Kantor, but his work didn't really influence your artistic career on the whole?**

RK: I got to know him by leaps and bounds. If I had been his contemporary, I'd probably have done things aesthetically akin to his work, using dilapidated objects. The work of Marek Chlanda and that of Mikołaj Smoczyński seem a similar case, both artists display corresponding behaviours as well as great sensitivity to economical means of expression and employed techniques. As for my emotional attitude, certain mortality, my body and mind have been so affected by all sorts of things that there's nothing new Kantor could provide to my concept of death, I believe. Importantly, he was consistent in generating the aura, being very exact in his use of instruments that should be used. I think he's alright, normal and natural when he offers us gloominess. There are people who can relate sadder stories, even more iconoclastic at times. This is my opinion, of course. If I dared to compare him with some other artists (I admire), he'd get a good seven out of ten.

MW: **A seven is not bad. It's probably for the best because it implies a distance. A seven, I suppose, gives you some space. A ten could act as an obstacle.**

RK: That's right. You can't be a fan or a fanatic because all your energy is spent elsewhere. Daniel Zagórski himself told me: don't do things for others, do them for yourself. Don't seek approval or fame or recognition, just keep doing your own thing, if someone comes round and gets goosebumps, it's fine. But you can't waste energy trying to capture attention.

MW: **Regarding profit and loss – I've recently heard in an interview that the pandemic didn't hit you that hard.**

RK: It didn't, and this hasn't changed. Despite the restrictions, most of the events I'd scheduled took place. There were perhaps two that we had to

RK: postpone. Now that lockdown has been lifted there's a mad rush underway to settle financial matters by the end of the tax year. Out of a sudden, we had to make every effort to do all we'd planned and to keep promises. At the same time, I found out what remote work is about. Though not the kind we know all too well that you simply sit in front of the computer – but the one that mobilises all people and instruments, like transport, bulldozers or cranes. In lockdown, I never left Lublin but I was still able to move the earth, for instance, instruct people working in museums. They do all the things I can't as it'd require me to travel and be in quarantine, to take all that risk. So the technique has changed, you apply your powers and energy in a different fashion, but things keep going as they should.

MW: **Which is good?**

RK: It's different, neither better nor worse. Is it better to be there analogically with your project? Yes, no doubt about that. Just like when I was making **Fotomorgana** in Sopot. I spent a month doing this project, not only coming up with ideas, arranging, assembling, acquiring and talking to people or convincing them to do some things. I was also there physically, every day from 8am to 9pm, working at the site. The mind rejoices when the body is in motion. It's worst to have to stay in one place. But this is possible, too. Individual projects can be carried out this way. Their energy is rather different, but they are possible.

MW: **Actually, it seems to me that pandemics have a tendency to release all kinds of energy, even though, at first sight, they may appear to sap it.**

RK: I have this feeling indeed that I once got when I was watching films about the plague as a child. A kind of social resetting, letting go: the *Danse Macabre* is going on, so we may as well enjoy ourselves for we all will die anyway.

Lockdown also took me on a great journey of impressions, one I could only dream of before, and I had dreamt about it while watching an apocalyptic film in childhood. It'd related a story of a catastrophe that killed all people but one. This man was all alone and he could go and see all the empty apartments and basements, everywhere, and find out all the deepest secrets of the human psyche. Just think! If something like that happened, let's say, in Poland and I was the only human being left, and I had this sensor telling me I'm safe and able to leave my shelter – I'd probably go mad if I did that. But then I'd also experience all the things that have ever sprouted in my mind. A captivating situation: to walk around, see things, to be able to enter every place, have a look. You see what a privilege that would be?

RK:

That was, of course, impossible. But the pandemic evoked this sort of feeling a little bit, there were many times I was on my own.

In 2014, when I was making **Träumgutstraße**, I had a similar experience of solitude in Warsaw. Middle of the city, a long weekend, I was walking through the city, through backyards, and I didn't meet a single living soul. No more than some three people in Nowy Świat, perhaps. But that was all. Kind of strange and terrifying. As though someone had asked all people to leave. This happened more often during the pandemic.

On the other hand, if people got stuck in void, they'd begin to miss others. So far, some hidden needs have been fulfilled. But there's also the question of looking for food, bearing hunger, finding and recycling water – in a catastrophe – what is not contaminated and can be of use. When I think of all this, I begin to see that the context of art retreats into the background, while the problem of survival gets priority... ×



















Exhibition:

THIRTY TO TOMORROW ROBERT KUŚMIROWSKI

Curators:

Magdalena Ujma, Kamil Kuitkowski

Artists:

Marek Chlanda

Andrzej Dudek-Dürer

Krzysztof „Leon” Dziemaszkiewicz

Jan Gryka

Mikołaj Smoczyński

Maciej Świeszewski

Daniel Zagórski

Coordination:

Kamil Kuitkowski

Publications:

Magdalena Link-Lenczowska

Coordination of the accompanying
programme:

Barbara Pasterak

Lighting and multimedia:

Mariusz Gasior, Maciej Jagoda

Arrangement works:

Łukasz Adamowicz, Andrzej Dudziński,

Gerard Piasecki

Accessibility:

Olga Curzydło, Barbara Pasterak

Graphic design:

Parastudio*

Promotion:

Jakub Wydra, Natalia Żabińska

Cooperation:

Justyna Droń, Joanna Geroch, Ewa Kaczmarczyk,

Michał Lelek, Małgorzata Miedzielec,

Aldona Mikulska, Łukasz Mzyk, Marcin

Nowak, Agnieszka Oprządek, Małgorzata

Paluch-Cybulska, Paweł Panic, Tomasz Pietrucha

Mariusz Potępa, Anna Pulit, Anna Rejowska

Bogdan Renczyński, Sylwia Skrzypek, Starowicz

Hudyma Radcowie Prawni s.c., Tomasz Stefaniak,

Joanna Tarłaga, Agnieszka Tomczak, Aleksandra

Treder, Natalia Zarzecka

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© Centre for the Documentation of the Art
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ul. Nadwiślańska 2-4, 30-527 Kraków
+48 12 422 77 70, cricoteka@cricoteka.pl
www.cricoteka.pl

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Parastudio

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PAŃSTWOWA GALERIA SZTUKI

PL-81-720 SOPOT, PLAC ZDROJOWY 2, tel.: (+48 58) 551 06 21, fax: 551 32 62, NIP 585-122-00-52, REGON 000277167



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