

# Where Are The Lions? / Ubi sunt leones?



In years past, unknown places on maps were marked with the words HIC SUNT LEONES, in English LIONS ARE HERE. Today, thanks to applications such as Google Earth, all of us have access to detailed views of up to 98% of the earth's surface, with the exception of some places that have been deleted based on threats to personal privacy or national security. Some data from the surface of the Moon and Mars are already available, as well as tools for monitoring the night sky. And lines are forming to climb Mount Everest...

As its name suggests, the exhibition is a reference to the fact that currently it is probably easier to climb the highest mountain in the world than to find an undiscovered spot on our planet. The exhibition itself does not enter unexplored territory: enough discovery and climbing literature has been written to fill several shelves of the National Library. Similarly, in recent years, self-help literature on getting out of one's comfort zone and overcoming physical and mental limits has become increasingly popular. Climbers, ultramarathoners and adventurers are world celebrities, invited to talk shows with millions of spectators. Despite the change in form, the theme of discovery and adventure is still alive, even at a time when everything has already apparently been discovered.

This somewhat ironic project was developed at a time when most people were forced into isolation at home during the coronavirus pandemic. This recent global experience highlights a subliminal theme, a kind of undercurrent of the exhibition: the dilemma of today's adventurers, who want to satisfy their romantic desire for the experience of discovering new places, while maintaining a responsible approach to the environment.

Where Are The Lions? / Ubi sunt leones? connects prominent Czech and foreign artistic personalities. Although they work with different media and come from different cultural backgrounds, they have in common a desire for adventure and exploring new territories, whether an icy landscape, the ocean, mountains or exploring familiar territory with a new form of transport. They are clearly the successors of artists who, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, embarked on the first exploratory expeditions alongside scientists-discoverers and helped explore the Earth through paintings and maps. As in the past, today's travelers and „risk-takers“ report on the current world in which we live.

<sup>1</sup> Historical and contemporary exhibition projects featuring themes of mountains and glaciers (Vanishing Ice, Mallory's Second Death etc.) hosted by local and foreign galleries were valuable sources of inspiration and information during the preparation of this project.

## I. Romanticism. The Path to the Line on Mount Everest

The social development that culminated in last year's line to climb Mt. Everest began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and fully developed in the nineteenth century along with the Romantic era. „During the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new and distinctive thirst emerged in Europe for distant lands, other territories, tastes and perceptions - for a category of experience that we would now call exotic; literally translated external. (...) The deepening desire to discover reflected a variety of frustrations, notably a general weariness of religion and the urban bourgeois existence. The familiar and predictable became the qualities against which one had to define oneself, and a hunger to see places where one could expect the unexpected only grew. The unknown began to be seen as a gateway to these alternative categories of experience,“ shares Robert Macfarlane, a British writer, climber and Cambridge professor, in his book *Mountains of the Mind* (2003). During the same era, artists progressively joined with geologists to discover „the wilderness“ together. The landscapes of the Alps, northern Norway and Scotland became attractive destinations for studies of natural sciences. If romantic artists did not directly participate in the expeditions directly, they could still benefit from their results: for example, when the geologist CF Naumann (1797-1873) returned to Dresden in 1822 from a two-year stay in Norway, his sketches were admired by famous painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, who used them as the basis for his own paintings. The resulting images combine all the drama of Romanticism with geological accuracy.<sup>2</sup> Artists returned the same service to science: their drawings and paintings (and later photographs) were published in scientific publications, as well as in popular magazines and travel guides, and provided Western Europeans with paintings from countries hitherto unknown to them. Explorers were the celebrities of their time (that is, if they returned); their travel records quickly became bestsellers and their images and maps were popular icons. With the growing popularity of such publications, interest grew exponentially in traveling to „exotic“ landscapes and for extreme experiences through mountaineering. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, travel (newly dubbed tourism - a term originally from the French „tour“; the round trip concept first appeared around 1800) became a popular way for the masses to spend their free time.<sup>3</sup>

## Filip Dvořák

(\*1990, lives and works in Hrádek nad Nisou)

*A painter confronting the elements on a mountaintop at sunrise on the last day before the end of the world.* CDF 21122012, video, 1:58, 2012/2013

The young artist Filip Dvořák works with the artistic principles of the Romantic period. In his work, nature is spontaneous and expressive, and the human is merely its humble imitator.

The painter wages a losing battle attempting to capture a footprint of the world before its inevitable demise. This recording of Filip Dvořák's performance, as the introductory work to the exhibition, represents a direct reference to Romanticism, specifically the iconic painting *The Pilgrim over the Sea of Mist* (circa 1818) by Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich's "Pilgrim" (like Dvořák's "Painter") stands on a mountain looking down (in Dvořák's case, at a snowstorm). Yet a century ago, at the beginning of the Enlightenment, mountains were usually depicted „from below“ and often in exaggeratedly monstrous, frightening shapes. What the Enlightenment began, Romanticism developed further: the human desire to confront nature, worship it, and at the same time to “seize” it (colonize) by subjecting it to research.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara C. Matilsky, *Vanishing Ice - Alpine And Polar Landscapes in Art, 1775-2012*, Whatcom Museum, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Note of interest: The first climbing club Klub český turistů was founded in 1888 under the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

## II. Mountains

Mountaineering's origins can be dated back to the 16th century. However, these first expeditions to the mountains were motivated exclusively by agricultural and economic interests, such as chamois hunting or the collection of minerals to make jewelry. Rough and untamed nature did not evoke an aesthetically pleasing experience, even according to some texts of the time, mountain landscapes were referred to as „ulcers“, „bumps“, „growths“ or even „nature's disgrace.“ Travelers began to visit mountain environments only in the second half of the 18th century, motivated by enthusiasm and the search for beauty. Romanticism described the mountain massifs as symbols of „nobility.“ The mountain peak then quickly became a secular symbol of effort and reward. „If we excel (excelsus meaning exalted, high), we are“ elevated, „we are at the peak of our strength. ‚Getting to the top‘ means reaching the maximum in an activity. Being on the „peak of bliss“ means feeling unrivaled. The feeling of success stemming from the conquest of mountain elevation was undoubtedly a historically key element of the desire to reach heights. And no wonder - what easier allegory of success to look for than climbing a mountain?“, Writes Macfarlane. By the end of the 19th century, all of the Alpine peaks had been vanquished and climbers had moved to the Himalayas. The growing interest in this new type of sport meant that climbing techniques and equipment were improving, which progressively allowed for increasing numbers of people to make their way up to the top.<sup>6</sup>

**Štefan Papčo**  
(\*1983, lives and works in Bratislava)

*Zuzana. Citizens.*  
wood, 91 × 60 × 145 cm, unique, courtesy of the artist and ZAHORIAN & VAN ESPEN, 2019

As Štefan Papčo's work shows, in addition to the search for beauty, grandeur and a sense of success, mountaineering may also be a way to overcome political lack of freedom. Zuzana was created by the Slovak sculptor Štefan Papčo as part of the sculptural group Citizens. Citizens represent a tribute to climbers who were at their peak in 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia as well as a memorial of the freedom constrictions at the time of “normalisation” and its particular consequences on the mountaineering.” The desire for self-realization has been reflected in some people's active climbing lifestyle. Mountaineering is a situation of voluntary risk. During the period of normalization, it offered an available form of self-realization as well as a chance for climbers to circumvent the “Iron Curtain's” political limitations. Those who reached the best peaks in the High Tatras were recruited onto the national team. Team representatives went twice a year to a monthly training camp in the Alps or other foreign mountains. (In the 1970s, during one season in the Alps, the climbers from the Czechoslovak bus made more ascents than any other representatives from the rest of the world.) Through the High Tatras, they bridged the landscapes of Eastern and Western Europe, as well as North and South America. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, many top climbers became successful entrepreneurs or scientists. This fact also confirms their inner strength and need for self-actualization. The prototype of the sculptural group consists of five eccentric personalities, some of whom lived on the edge of the law (Pavel Pochylý, Miroslav Šmíd). Other selected climbers, with their charm and strong personalities, were the driving engines of important climbing clubs (Stanislav Glejdura, Zuzana Hoffmannová, Alena Čepelková, Andrej Belica). Papčo captured these luminaries in situational positions of bivouacking in the mountainside. The climbers' statues were rendered and installed for three years on the Europeans mountainsides where they had operated and made their major climbing achievements.

**Nataša Kokić**  
(\*1979, lives and works in Belgrade)

*Landscape I*  
Pencil on paper, 2020

Nataša Kokić has long dedicated her work to large-format drawings of landscapes and motifs from the study of natural sciences. The Serbian artist considers the landscape a metaphor for contemporary life: the complex terrain is sometimes illustrated down to the smallest detail, yet a moment later unravels into abstract lines which no longer resemble the original likeness. “We twist our reality. Each of us perceives our space subjectively. We create a strange distorted inner world, in which we then reside,” Kokić speaks of her drawings. With her work, we do not have to climb any mountains, because we ourselves are the mountains...

### III. For Those Who Cannot Meditate

In one of his books, His Holiness the Dalai Lama recommends the following strategy as an aid against weakness - that is, insufficient concentration on one's object of meditation: "First, try to intensify your perception of the object. If that doesn't help, brighten or elevate the object, or pay more attention to its details. If that doesn't help, leave the object and think temporarily about joyful things (...).<sup>4</sup> If that doesn't help, leave the meditation and go to an elevated place or somewhere with a great view."<sup>5</sup> Climbing a mountain, endurance running or any other demanding and stamina-based physical exertion are all functional means of achieving calm, concentration or new knowledge for those who are unable to meditate.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the wonderful qualities of love and compassion, or the great opportunity that human life provides us for spiritual practice), in: His Holiness Dalajlama, Jeffrey Hopkins, *Jak vidět sebe samé tak, jací doopravdy jsme*, Argo, 2017, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, s. 129.

### Macarena Ruiz-Tagle

(\*1981, born in Santiago de Chile. Lives and works in Berlin and Santiago de Chile)

From the series *ATMOSPHERIC POLLUTION* A6 postcards, 4 of the original 8 paintings. Acrylic on canvas, 2018

This "altered state" at the exhibition is represented by abstract paintings from the *Atmospheric Pollution* series by Chilean painter Macarena Ruiz-Tagle.

Macarena Ruiz-Tagle created the series *Atmospheric Pollution* during her internship in Hong Kong.

As one of the inspirations for the (originally eight) large canvases, the artist cites a (terrifying!) time-lapse record of a smog cloud moving through the narrow streets of Hong Kong. Another starting point for her was a chapter from the book *White* by Kenya Hara (2009), which analyzes the significance of white spaces within the plurality of their meanings. Chapter 3: Emptiness deals with the work of the Japanese painter Hasegawa Tohaku (1539 - 1610), whose ink painting "Pine Trees" on a six-part screen (hexptych) is one of the most important works in Japanese history. Kenya Hara explains the emphasis that the Japanese painters place on white surface areas. "Empty" spaces play a dominant role, as they awaken the senses and the imagination.

The power of Macarena's canvases lies in the contrast of the strong visual experience of white spaces and blurred color gradients while envisioning breathing extremely polluted air. With their alluring ambivalent aesthetic, the paintings create space for contemplation within the environment of our troubled atmosphere.

#### IV. Other Knowledge

What is at the core of the inner urge that drives a person to climb El Capitan's 900 meter wall without any protection? Is it fear of volatile superficiality, the horror vacui, fear of the end of the world, or, paradoxically, the fear of death? Are we afraid that we will not live our short lives to the fullest, that we will not exhaust our potential, that we will be just passive consumers of our destiny? Isn't the hunt for adventure just the activity of people who are empty inside, who can't be in the same room with themselves?

Whether it is a desire for perfection, self-knowledge, attainment of inner peace, or acceptance and forgiveness, the common motivation of people seeking extreme experiences is the pursuit of "other knowledge." In other words, an attempt to discover a new way of thinking through intense physical experiences, to overcome the learned patterns imprinted by the culture in which we grew up. In this sense, the exhibition *Where Are the Lions? / Ubi sunt leones?* is a continuation of the exhibition and research cycle "Other Knowledge", which MeetFactory Gallery launched this year as its long-term theme. Our aim is to observe such phenomena and related works of art that go beyond the traditional worldview in which we - members of the middle class of Central European descent from the turn of the millennium - were enculturated.

## V. Extensive Discovery

The romantic image of discovering unknown lands and the celebration of their founders has its negative side, in that colonization means usurping a given land and plundering its original inhabitants. In colonial period paintings, the explorers are depicted as happy and proud alpha-males, puffed up with pride at their freshly caught prey, ignoring the colonialist consequences of their expeditions.

Today's adventurer has a heavy conscience, burdened by the ecological effects of travel. Leaving a carbon footprint, and the extensive „discovery“ of the planet, as well as the current experience with closed borders and quarantine measures, have led many travelers to reconsider their current habits. Is it even possible to conduct “discovery” in a truly considerate manner?

(I can't shake the feeling that Chomolungma, the highest mountain peak on our earth, is in physical pain.)

**Felix Kiesslig**  
(\*1980, lives and works in Berlin)

*Erddurchstechung CH-IT, Oasi Monumento Natural Palude di Torre Flavia (Italy) – Emablse El Yeso (Chile), 2019.*

—  
*Rangipo Desert, New Zealand & Parque Nacional de Cabañeros, Spain, 2017.*  
permanent installation, 2 metal poles, each 260cm, fine art inkjet print

If we attribute a mountain with the ability to feel pain, how must the planet feel in the hands of Felix Kiessling! When he's not piercing the globe from one side through to another, he's removing the water from the rivers and then calculating the decrease in surface water on a global scale. Or he shortens continental Europe by 40 cm at the northern and southern tips by cutting off edges of the coast and then ridiculously proclaims “Your maps are no longer accurate!” Unlike Dvořák and Kokić, Kiessling's land art captures the Earth “tamed”. He approaches the land as sculpture material which he can manipulate to achieve his artistic ends. At first glance, the work may seem like the act of a cheeky skeptic on a playground (the size of the world). But doesn't such manipulation, even minimal, remind us of the Earth's mystical power? Felix's works of art constitute one of many examples in which a small action can have monumental consequences, if we only alter the gauge with which we observe it. In this way Kiessling's minimalist works-happenings leave a tangible feeling of immensity.

**Rafani**

*Lesní cestou*  
digital print, 2018, photo: Lukáš Jasanský

By moving the border bollard, Rafani shortened the Czech Republic by ten meters.



## VI. Oceans and ice landscapes as shared space

If we want to find an area on our planet that has yet to be explored, we must turn our attention to the ocean. Despite the number of satellite images, it is impossible to apprehend its surface, which is constantly changing, depending on how the ocean breathes.<sup>6</sup> And what about the underwater world! With the 20<sup>th</sup> century development of technology, scientists have penetrated the deep ocean floors, and an understanding of plate tectonics has brought comprehension of their origins - yet with its vast volume, most of the world's oceans remain unscrutinized.

Alexander Ponomarev is an artist who systematically works with the seas and oceans. A former sailor, naval engineer and multimedia artist, he has been creating works of art since the 1990 s, which combine all of these skills; whether building a ship in the Moroccan desert, a submarine passing through the canals of Venice, drawings on navigation maps (which we would have exhibited if not for the coronavirus crisis) or presenting a naval event - a MAYA performance.

In recent years, Ponomarev has advocated as widely as possible the idea of „expeditionary art,“ with a subtext of an idealistic apolitical supranational shared space. The organizer of the first Antarctic Biennial (2017), he sailed with a one-hundred-member crew of artists, writers, philosophers, architects and technicians around the Antarctic „mainland“. The artistic program consisted of performances, short-term installations (which, after documentation, were uninstalled and taken back on board), lectures and discussions on the ship. Participants in the biennial were invited to reflect on the universal cultural future of Antarctica as a model of „shared space“ similar to the oceans and the cosmos.

And in the same year, David Böhm and Jiří Franta sailed the same seas...

### Alexander Ponomarev

(\*1957, born in Dnipropetrovsk, lives and works in Moscow)

#### *Maya. The Lost Island.*

Action, Barents Sea, Northern Fleet,  
1999–2000.

In the Barents Sea Ponomarev collaborated with sailors of the northern fleet to organize an expedition of four ships, using special naval equipment to temporarily erase Sedlovaty island from the face of the earth, after first taking it off the nautical map.

Not long after this “naval performance“, the K-141 Kursk submarine was tragically sunk in the waters of the Barents Sea on August 12, 2000, killing 118 crew members. According to Alexander Ponomarev, his action was condemned by some viewers as a harbinger or even a cause of this misfortune. Since this performance, a number of events have happened in the world which have potentially influenced the interpretation of his work specifically within the context of tense geopolitical relations between Russia and the West. The author himself speaks of his work as pure “land art“, or more precisely “ocean art“

“*Maya! Maya!*” exclaimed the ascetic yogi in Hermann Hesse’s novel *The Game of Glass Pearls* (1943), when seeking unity with a higher principle; to this the title of Ponomareva’s performance directly refers. His intonation and light laughter reveal the meaning of the exclamation: “Maya is life, Maya is youth, sweet bliss and bitter suffering, Maya is love, everything is Maya. In the eyes of a holy man, Maya is convinced that everything is childish, performative, illusion, emptiness in a shiny wrapper, a soap bubble - something we may laugh at and despise at the same time, but not to be taken seriously. “It was not until a few years later, during the installation of his artwork in Tibet, that Ponomarev learned that in Tibetan, “*māyā*” refers to an illusion, a ghost.

### David Böhm a Jiří Franta

(\*1982 and \*1978, both live and work in Prague)

#### *See You in the Future*

Antarctica, video, 2017.

We carved out the phrase SEE YOU IN THE FUTURE on four pebbles and threw them one at a time onto freely floating icebergs.

#### *Untitled, 2020,*

Mural out of the drawings that were made during the expedition to Antarctica, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> I have borrowed the metaphor of a breathing ocean from David Böhm, who, after his Antarctic travels, published the educational book *As Is For Antarctica*, which received the Magnesia Litera prize for Children’s Literature. According to David, waves look like the inhalations and exhalations of the sea.

## VII. Microadventurism

Planet earth is becoming increasingly defiant against our smug belief that the world was created by and for humans. And so, once in a while, he attacks with disaster. This exhibition was prepared at a time when we were all forced to reconsider our plans, reduce activity in our lives and stay at home for a few weeks. Increasing numbers of people are abandoning long-distance travel trips in hopes of reducing humanity's carbon footprint. A recent alternative for those who do not want to give up the excitement of discovering new places and situations is offered by a phenomenon recently dubbed microadventures.

The hashtag #microadventure was disseminated globally via social networks by the British adventurer Alastair Humphreys, who in 2011 exchanged long journeys for small expeditions near his residence. He summed up his urban experiences, such as a trip around the M25 motorway bypass, in the book *Microadventures: Local Discoveries for Great Escapes*, which quickly became a bestseller.<sup>7</sup> The great interest in the phenomenon of „local“ experiences thus fits into the current social need for a sustainable way of life.

**Vladimír Turner**  
(\*1986, lives and works in Prague)

*Modern Times*  
video, 20 min, 2020

Vladimír Turner's new film *Modern Times* (based on Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film of the same name) presents "hooverboard etudes" and focuses on the alienation caused by technological progress. "Modern times have changed dramatically since Charlie Chaplin. Today, given his soulful reflection on the world, Chaplin would probably be dependent on Xanax," says Turner. According to Turner, in humanity's effort to escape boredom and natural movement, it has achieved the ridiculous extension of human limbs via technological conveniences. The main character, a lone figure, strikes out onto the city streets and the wild landscape of the Atlantic coast. He gets into paradoxical situations drawn out to absurd proportions. The performer-tourist discovers some mountains, but in reality he is a lazy consumer who rides on a Hooverboard. Turner is a good example of an "urban" adventurer and supporter of so-called microadventureism. Hashtag #microadventure has been expanded globally through social networks by the British adventurer Alastair Humphreys, who in 2011 exchanged long journeys for small expeditions near his residence. He summed up his urban experiences in the book *Microadventures: Local Discoveries for Great Escapes*, which quickly became a bestseller. The strong interest in the phenomenon of "local" experiences thus satisfies into the current social need for a sustainable way of life and offers an alternative to today's adventurers, whose desire for experiences is redeemed by their bad conscience regarding their surroundings and the environment.

Concept, Direction, Performance:	Vladimír Turner
Camera - Czech Republic:	Petr Racek
Camera - France:	Vladimir Turner
Assistant Director:	Mars Industries

The film was made with the support of the MeetFactory Gallery and the La Fourmie Association

<sup>7</sup> Petr Horký, *Zbytečnost, která dává smysl*, (Sensible Futility) in: *Respekt*, XXX/2019, p. 54.



## Kde jsou lvi? / Ubi sunt leones?

23. 9. — 8. 11. 2020

**Artists:** Filip Dvořák <sup>CZ</sup>, Jiří Franta & David Böhm <sup>CZ</sup>, Felix Kiessling <sup>DE</sup>,  
Nataša Kokić <sup>RS</sup>, Štefan Papčo <sup>SK</sup>, Alexander Ponomarev <sup>UA</sup>,  
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**Special thanks:** Tereza Jindrová

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MeetFactory is supported in 2020 by a grant from  
the City of Prague amounting to 10.000.000 CZK.