Interview with Maja and Reuben Fowkes

Update the interview with 3-4 more questions:
http://mezosfera.org/natural-artistic-and-political-ecologies-of-east-central-europe/

Interview question continued:

Q1: Since the last question of the interview above, you have moved to London, where as part of UCL's Institute of Advanced Studies, you now head the Post-Socialist Art Centre (PACT). It is here you recently initiated an interdisciplinary research project concerning the Socialist Anthropocene to challenge the West-centric discourses of the Anthropocene. You have been living and working between Central and Eastern Europe and the UK for decades, which gives you a unique insight and perspective. How can we begin to understand the histories and legacies of socialism in relation to the problems of the Anthropocene?

Investigation of the ramifications of the Anthropocene started for us as part of the curriculum of the Translocal Institute in Budapest, through the multi-year residential and travelling programme of the Anthropocene Reading Room, as well as through establishing an MA course on the Visual Cultures of the Anthropocene at CEU, which ran for several years before the forced relocation of the university to Vienna. So the foundations for our work on the Socialist Anthropocene were actually laid in Central Europe. At UCL we are working with an interdisciplinary team on establishing the Socialist Anthropocene as a critical tool that highlights the specific socialist path through the Great Acceleration and offers a counterpoint to universalizing notions of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, while being in dialogue with the Black, Indigenous and Decolonial critiques of its West-centric narrative. In order to effectively achieve that we have to go beyond East-Eurocentrism to find points of connection across the territories of global socialisms from Central Asia to Cuba, understanding the Socialist Anthropocene as a systemic alternative rather than a regional variation. Methodologically it entails examining environmental histories, reconstructing eco-socialist epistemologies and reassessing artistic practices, looking again at the socialist past to activate its potentialities in addressing the planetary challenge of climate breakdown. It's a five-year visual arts led project, with major funding from the European Research Council, with planned conferences, public programmes, publications and the podcast series Left to be Desired, which records the voices of those who look at the eco-socialist past afresh.

Q2: You have developed Translocal Institute in Hungary, which for several years was an important educational platform for students, artists, etc. How do you see this from a distance and after leaving Hungary?

Q3: One of your most recent publications, *Art and Climate Change (World of Art),* was published in 2022 (by Thames & Hudson). At a time when there is an increasing awareness of the global climate emergency, and the field of art and ecology is quickly expanding, you have put together a publication which features a broad range of artists and projects, yet it also managed to address specific issues in a depth, including topics such as the Scars of Extraction, Soil Reserves, and Vegetal Agency, just to mention a few. What were the challenges of writing a book like this?

Art and Climate Change is our second book in the World of Art series. It was preceded by *Central and Eastern European Art Since the 1950s* (2020), which brought together the diverse art histories of the region from post-war socialist realism to the global contemporaneity of the post-socialist era in a comparative perspective, and was also the last project we worked on in Budapest before moving to post-Brexit London. Although the format was the same, we approached *Art and Climate Change* slightly differently, and wrote it as more of a curatorial text, focusing on contemporary artistic positions from

various sites of crisis across the globe and organizing the book through shorter units that could be accessed separately or viewed as part of a larger narrative. Most importantly, we wanted to consider the implications of climate disaster not as a single issue, but as an entangled and all-encompassing planetary event that is transforming everything in its wake, so only one part of the book looks at the anthropogenic causes of climate change, while the rest is devoted to its impacts on natural entities, vegetal worlds, other terrestrials, and how it threatens as well as activates human communities across the planet. It was a real pleasure to write about so many amazing practices and to see the abundance of approaches with which artists address the climate crisis, from courageously disclosing the mechanisms of the unsustainable world system to opening unsuspecting horizons for planetary survivance.

Q4:
Alongside writing, publishing and leading a research centre, you also regularly curate exhibitions. How do these different activities complement each other, and how does working with artists and materials inform your research? /Are you collaborating closely with artists on artistic research projects?

Yes, methodologically there is fluidity and overlaps between our curatorial and academic work, and we also approach curating exhibitions as not necessarily that different to writing an essay, but a collective one, which takes shape in dialogue with artists. Our collaboration with Ilona Németh resulted in an ambitious publication *Ilona Németh: Eastern Sugar* (Sternberg Press, 2021), which focused on her research into the disappearance of the sugar industry in post-socialist Central Europe, while our editorial intervention was to embed these sugar beet histories alongside the parallel narratives of Caribbean sugar cane, revealing the collisions of postcolonial and neocolonial experience and their entwined environmental legacies. Related to this was the exhibition Potential Agrarianisms at Kunsthalle Bratislava (2021), which brought together artistic positions that envisaged agricultural realms as sites of unrealized possibilities, destabilizing urban-rural dichotomies and seeking to repair the societal disconnect from the natural world. Working closely with artists is constantly productive and reinvigorating, and it is also a constitutive part of our project on the Socialist Anthropocene, where appointed artists are core members of the research team.

Q5: Questions around ecology, the Anthropocene and interspecies entanglements are – for obvious reasons – very popular right now. How do you perceive the trend that recently many artists and curators are turning towards these questions, including sometimes in a superficial way?

Due to the unprecedented transformations set in motion by human interference in the biogeochemical processes of the planet, it is inevitable that artists and curators feel compelled to respond, while art institutions emulate their concerns. These are not just questions of trends or discourses, but of challenges of seismic proportions that are also reconfiguring art infrastructures. The situation in the artworld might be comparable to the realization of experts that the crisis is so deep and so dire that all forces should be activated if we are to avoid or at least delay the worst consequences of global warming, rendering the debate over whether the solution to the climate crisis should be sought in working together with natural systems or in the intensification of technological innovations redundant. It appears to us that we shouldn't be too strict about the degree of engagement with ecology in an art context, as long as it's not at the service of fossil interests, since even small steps and gestures can contribute to creating momentum for change.

Q6: What are your most current research interests and upcoming projects?