

MALTE BARTSCH

T.I.N.A.

25.10. – 06.12.2024

K A L I
G A L L E R Y

Margaret Thatcher, the "Iron Lady" of neoliberalism, earned the nickname "Tina" for her political slogan "There is no alternative". Malte Bartsch takes up this phrase in the title of his exhibition at KALI Gallery, but invites us to read it against the grain: In our crisis-ridden present, where not only economic "progress" has reached its limits, there is indeed no alternative. There is no alternative to finally taking action to create a more social and ecological future.

In his works, Malte Bartsch engages with questions of economic policy and social sciences, positioning himself as a critic of neoliberal societal formations. In the exhibition *T.I.N.A.*, the artist focuses on the relationship between nature and technology. For the development of the series of works shown here, the mythological figure of Prometheus was an important reference point. The Titan Prometheus brought fire to humanity, laying the groundwork for technological advancements and the possibility of human emancipation from nature. With fire, early humans could not only cook their food, increasing calorie intake and promoting brain growth, but fire also extended the day and encouraged people to tell stories in its light. According to anthropologist Polly Wiessner, this storytelling served to reinforce cultural norms, foster empathy, and strengthen a sense of togetherness, even beyond one's own group. The concept of the "Pyrocene," coined by Stephen Pyne, extends this perspective further, emphasizing that humanity, through the technology of fire, not only transformed themselves but also radically altered the Earth. In the current era of the "third fire," in which we are burning fossil fuels on a massive scale, the historian succinctly observes: "We've begun to cook the planet."

Malte Bartsch picks up the theme of fire in two works in the exhibition: the glass sculptures *Soft Landing (Eternal Flame)* (2024), whose forms resemble flames, and the cast aluminum sculpture *Macchina del fuoco artificiale* (2024). The "machine of artificial fire" is inspired by fireworks and market-driven logics. The artist connects these two seemingly different contexts through their shared trait of "creative destruction": creation and destruction condition each other in an endless cycle. The base of the sculpture recalls a fragment of a Baroque building, referring to the 18th-century practice at European courts of constructing elaborate backdrops for fireworks displays (which often caught fire during the spectacle, whether intentionally or as collateral damage remains unclear). These fireworks were part of grand parades celebrating the king, entertaining the population, and likely also serving to stabilize existing power structures. Yet, they could not prevent the upheaval of the French Revolution. In the upper part of the sculpture, figures in business suits can be seen riding locusts. This locust metaphor refers to corporations that buy up companies, saddle them with debt, and often dismantle them to meet short-term and excessive profit expectations. The fireworks depicted in Bartsch's sculpture, unlike those of the 18th-century aristocracy, are on the side of the people, hinting that an economic logic based on profit maximization and progress for the few is about to go up in flames. And, as many a phoenix has risen from the ashes, we might hope that something new and better will emerge from this destruction.

The question of what life can arise from the ruins of capitalism is also addressed by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). In it, the anthropologist develops her concept of "assemblage," which proves fruitful for Bartsch's exhibition, particularly in terms of the dimension of time. Assemblages, as described by Lowenhaupt Tsing, are complex entanglements between human and non-human actors that are polyphonic, loose, dynamic, unpredictable, and unexpected (in contrast to a traditional, linear, progress-oriented view of social and ecological developments). She emphasizes the coexistence and overlapping of different temporalities: the actors of an assemblage follow their own, distinct rhythms. If we let go of our fixation on progress (which, as with Bartsch's fireworks machine, is on the verge of burning out), we can perceive these diverse temporalities. Thus, the exhibition can be understood as a kind of assemblage where different actors meet, each breathing their own temporal rhythms but also connecting with one another to form something new: fire, trees, artworks, moons, screens, time machines, people, spaces.

In my search for a connection with the works, their materiality—the aluminum, the glass, the impenetrable blue of the photographic prints, the digitally mediated surfaces of the moons—initially echoed back my visual probing. But then I imagined the surfaces becoming permeable, diving into the works, swimming in the molten glass, walking on the moons, riding the locusts, inhaling the fine dust of the fireworks and the scent of pine needles in the fog, immersing myself in their times.

I leave the exhibition space with this assemblage between nature and technology, but not without pressing the red button on the *Time Machine* (since 2013): for each work, the perceived number of seconds.

Josiane Imhasly

Josiane Imhasly is a freelance curator, author, and lecturer. She has curated exhibitions for Lemme (Sion), Kunstforum Baloise Park (Basel), and Alte Fabrik / Gebert Stiftung für Kultur (Rapperswil), among others. In 2015, she initiated the exhibition project *Zur frohen Aussicht* in the mountain village of Ernen, Valais.