

Impossible Songs by Mikołaj Sobczak

synopsis

The exhibition *Impossible Songs* unveils the manifold universe of Polish artist Mikołaj Sobczak in three acts: the screening of a musical, three installations, and seven cutout panels. *Impossible Songs* departs from Sobczak's musical *The Universal Empire*, originally performed in the Mennonite Church in Amsterdam, expanding its universe and enriching its cast with new characters. Some of the set pieces and props have been imbued with the atmosphere and alchemic energy of the live performance and carry its essences into this new constellation.

The musical narrates the story of two members of an Anabaptist^{*} commune in Amsterdam and the turmoil that arises from an unexpected encounter with William Blake^{*}, who is uncannily transported into their world. Entangled in notions of economics, spirituality, religious persecution, and modernity, the characters represent (and are named after) the alchemical elements of Salt, Sulfur, and Mercury. Blake spiritually floats outside of time and space, sometimes plunging into the hopeful commune and sometimes into a capitalist apocalypse. He becomes Mercury, an ever-shifting and cunning alter ego, to confront an impending world in which he feels out of place: the modern world, dominated by capital, trade, and velocity. A particular notion of utopia recurs in the narrative and in the words of the characters. The utopia Blake longs for, or the commune he could belong to, is not a hypothetical prospect but the current condition of wanting, made possible by the sharing of lack and the acknowledgment of common limitations. As Anahid Nersessian phrased it in *Utopia, limited*, the Romantics saw utopia as

“a vision of a better world neither cleaved off from nor materially distinct from our own”. In the musical, Sulfur laments: “*Utopia that – as always – turned into dystopia. We fought for the world without private property. Without money. Everything is shared. Everything is common. This is when they started to burn us at stakes.*” As Sulfur describes it, the threat of a possible utopia was unacceptable to the emergent nation-states arising during Blake's time.

The commune cannot exist and prosper if the novel, shiny capitalistic machine needs fuel. In the sixteenth century, the persecution of many different types of heretics^{*} was functional to the establishment of a new economy based on exploitation or, as Arthur Evans puts it in *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*: “*Everywhere heresy-hunting helped provide the needed capital for building up the apparatus of the emerging state.*” Thus, the accusation of heresy was made into an instrument of constriction and repression of any deviancy, ultimately becoming a sexual rather than a doctrinal concept. The many related in the exhibition celebrate the queer^{*} counterculture in which utopia was still possible, while also bemoaning the persecution necessary for the realization of a capitalist dystopia.

William Blake^{*} is one of the three protagonists of *The Universal Empire* and one of the three characters whose lives are evoked in the exhibition space. After all, Mercury is the binding force that makes one out of many. The other two puppets represent Eva Kotchever and Sylvin Rubinstein in emblematic

poses, caught in the midst of their most meaningful actions of resistance. Eva's sensuality and Sylvin's potency reflect the characteristics of the alchemic elements of salt and sulfur, already present in the musical.

Additional histories are illustrated on either side of the cutout panels that populate the remainder of the space. The tales of persecution and celebration of Anabaptist martyrs engraved on the verso are mirrored by more recent examples of queer^{*} resistance on the recto: from Teofil Kosiński, a Polish man that was arrested during World War II for a love letter he wrote to an Austrian soldier, to Lulla La Polaca, activist and drag^{*} performer still active in the queer^{*} community of Warsaw. Through the collection and revelation of untold histories, Sobczak's practice takes a prophetic form that mimics some of Blake's compositions. Just as utopia isn't born out of a leap into the unreal, prophecy too is not a blind oracle but a translation of an example of the immediate past into the future.

The impossibility of the title is the perpetual unlikelihood looming over any historical fact. Factual changes can be ungraspable and there seems to be an insurmountable gap between lived experience and history itself. The same could be said of Blake's own life, work, writings, and songs. They would be considered most unlikely if not for the fact that they did exist. Blake's songs are his poems, collected in illustrated volumes like the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, referenced in some corners of *Impossible Songs*.

25.05 — 31.08

MIKOŁAJ
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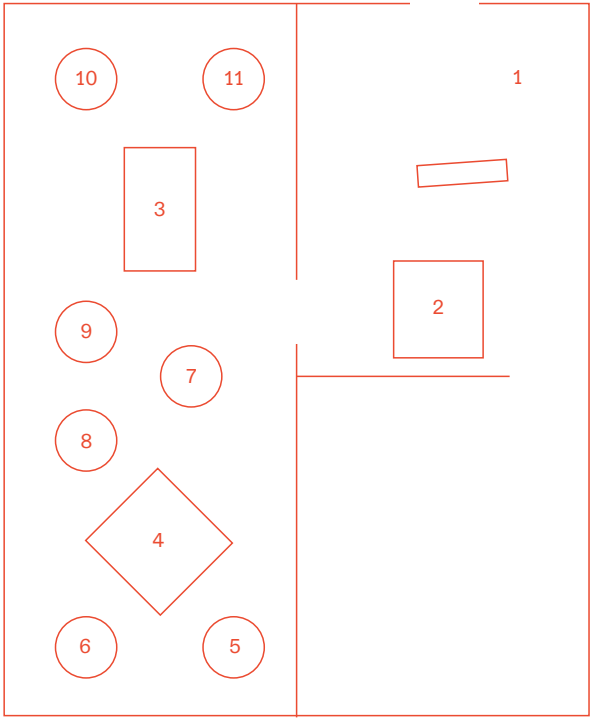


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characters
in order of
appearance



ACT I

- 1 — According to alchemy, every human being is made up of three elements: salt, sulfur, and mercury. Salt represents the mind, our rational side. In the musical **Salt** runs the Anabaptist* commune following the emerging rules of capitalism. **Sulfur** is connected to the more instinctual and impulsive side. The corresponding character is the spiritual component of the commune, extremely sensitive and often moved by desire. **Mercury** is the connective element and manifests itself as the time-traveling William Blake*. His warnings about modernity and capitalism are both mystical and intellectual.

ACT II

- 2 — **William Blake***'s room. After serving as Mercury, the connector binding force between the characters in the musical, Blake functions here as an ideal bridge between the musical and the exhibition, as well as the link between Eva and Sylvin.
- 3 — **Sylvin Rubinstein's** room (see 8). Occupied by his transformation into Dolores, Sylvin is also preparing for one of his operations as an agent of the resistance. On the door, the *Skat players* - war veterans with heavily scarred and deformed bodies borrowed from a painting by Otto Dix - are busy with their game. Two original photographs, most probably from a Wehrmacht*'s album which was produced *en masse*, show cross-dressing* soldiers performing as a form of entertainment. He is the incendiary element, the equivalent of Sulfur.
- 4 — **Eva Kotchever's** room (see 7). Eva is reading her lesbian pulp fiction book "Lesbian Love". Painted on the clock we see Margaret Leonard, the policewoman who caused Eva's arrest by accusing Eva of flirting with her. Eva is connected to Salt, the sensual element.

ACT III

- 5 — Recto: **Lulla La Polaca** is the oldest drag queen* in Poland. Born Andrzej Szwan in 1938 in Warsaw into a family of Jewish origin, he was rescued from the ghetto and witnessed the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. He was an active member of the Warsaw gay community at the time of the Polish People's Republic, remaining an activist for the rights of non-heteronormative people and the queer* community in Poland to this day. He made his debut on stage in 2012 thanks to Kim Lee, a Polish drag queen* of Vietnamese origin here depicted together with Lulla on the night of her debut. The other photographs show cross-dressing* parties in which Lulla would wear "a red dress made of a flag", as she jokingly recalled it.
- Verso: Title Page to *The Discription of the severall sorts of Anabaptists** by William Marshall, British, active ca. 1617–1650.

- 6 — Recto: **Teofil (Stefan) Kosiński**, was born in 1925 in Toruń and lived to be 78 years old. In 1942, he was convicted under Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code*, which penalized homosexuality, for having an affair with an Austrian soldier, Willi Götz. He was held until 1945, when he escaped from a prison near Hamburg. With Lutz van Dijk describing his memories from World War II in *Damned Strong Love: The True Story of Willi G. and Stefan K*, his name and surname were revealed only after his death, having hidden the truth about himself from his family. During one of his many travels, Teofil invited Lulla La Polaca into his hotel room to show her a cross-dressing* outfit made of towels. Sobczak has recreated this moment based on conversations he had with Lulla herself.
- Verso: *Killing of Anabaptists** in Amsterdam from the *Book of Martyrs* by John Fox, 1535.

- 7 — Recto: During her research into women prisoners in concentration camps, the feminist activist and publisher Suzette Robichon discovered the story of **Eva Kotchever** (see 4). Known by several monikers, of which Eva Adams is an example, Eva was born in 1891 in Mława into a Polish-Jewish family as Chawa Złoczower. In 1912, she emigrated from Poland to the United States, where she became involved in the anarchist movement. She also published *Lesbian Love*, the first collection in the lesbian pulp fiction genre, having been published three years before *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall in 1925. During the Prohibition*, she opened the Eve Adams Tearoom, a popular meeting point for lesbian women. Due to the publication of the book, she was arrested for obscenity and deported to Poland after being purposely seduced by an undercover policewoman. From there she moved to Paris, where she sold books banned in the US. In 1943, she got involved with Hella Olstein, a Jewish singer from Łódź. Due to a lack of funds, they failed to emigrate from France in time, were transported to Auschwitz, and murdered. Between the photos Sappho, a famous ancient Greek homoerotic poet, hands over her lira to Eva.
- Verso: *Anabaptists* walk naked across Dam Square in Amsterdam and are captured* by Jan Lucas van der Beek, 1535.

- 8 — Recto: **Sylvin Rubinstein** (see 3) was a flamenco dancer of Jewish descent, born either in 1914 or 1917. In the early 1930s, he saw great success on European stages with his twin Maria, as the duo Imperio and Dolores. After successfully escaping the Warsaw Ghetto, they received help from a German major named Werner, who remembered their performances and encouraged Sylvin to join the resistance movement to help hide Jewish children and engage in sabotage activities. According to his recollections, he threw grenades into a restaurant frequented by Nazi soldiers during one of his actions dressed as a

woman. He stayed in Werner's Berlin apartment until the end of the war, and in the 1950s, he started performing on German cabaret stages as Dolores, commemorating his sister who was murdered in Treblinka. Sylvin is painted dancing as he would in one of his later shows, while his portrait is taken from a photo of him as a young man.

— Verso: Maria van Beckum (to the right on the pyre) and her sister-in-law Ursula van Beckum (the woman on the left, who is being held), both Anabaptists*, are burnt at the stake, by Jan Luyken, from the *Martyrs Mirror*, 1685.

- 9 — Recto: The intimate relationship between **Józef Niemczyk** and Erich Nägele began in the shelter for Poles and caused Józef's interrogation under Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code*. The house in the photo is Erich's home in Tübingen, where the relationship between him and Józef developed. The painted figures are taken from two illustrations: the man taking pictures mimics Erich using his camera and was originally created by Polish illustrator Maja Berezowska. Specialized in erotic illustrations, she was the author of a series of images of Hitler

caught in indecent affairs with different women. She was sentenced to be detained in Ravensbrück's concentration camp on account of these illegal drawings. There, she would draw other prisoners, often in sensual poses and with a certain sexual tension. This notion leads us to reflect on how we remember and metabolize history and tragedy, and reminds us of the connection the scholar and editor Vasyl Cherepanyn posited between the tension caused by depictions of war and the one aroused by erotic imagery. The second illustration is by William Blake* and it represents the Angel of the Revelation holding a book: a reference to the notebook with poems that Erich wrote in prison.

— Verso: Title Page to *History of Anabaptists**, 1699.

- 10 — Recto: **Alex** was born in 1906 in the Lublin region and lived for 65 years. He escaped binary gender patterns and openly performed his otherness. He wore high heels, makeup, and often "feminine" clothes. Court and police records show that he used male pronouns and the term "homosexual", but he might have used different gendered forms when speaking in his daily life. He was tried and

sentenced to prison many times due to his sexual identity in Lublin and Warsaw before and during World War II. He actively participated in the life of the queer* community and would organize parties at the Central Hotel in Lublin (a photo of which is visible on the panel) and, after its bombing, in a restaurant in Warsaw. The document reproduced here was stolen by Alex from someone named Mieczysław, a citizen with no criminal record, to be adopted as his identity card. Throughout his life, Alex explored many passions and talents. He is shown playing the piano using a weight to push one of the keys, a reference to his experience as a student of commerce in Antwerp and of music in Warsaw. The artist borrows the characters of the triptych Großstadt (Metropolis) by Otto Dix to pay homage to the fantastical outfits he presumably has worn during his legendary parties.

— Verso: *Die Wiedertäufer von Münster* by Renate Geisberg-Wichmann, 1937.

- 11 — Recto: **Adam Gawron** was born in 1899 in one of the towns on the Radom-Dęblin railway line. He was a political prisoner held in Auschwitz

for fighting with the partisans*. After the war, he was actively involved in the life of the countryside, sharing his experience of Auschwitz during his lectures in schools. We know a lot about how he was regarded in his community. Neighbors and family knew about his non-normativity, but it was not a reason for rejection or persecution, both in peace and war. He would always wear rain boots and jeans, and he would collect textiles of many kinds with the dream of becoming a tailor. He is said to have informally adopted a child, here represented through a painting by Władysław Ślewiński titled *Sierota z Poronina* (Orphan from Poronin). Another one of his peculiar interests was chiromancy, the art of reading one's future on the palm of their hand. He died at the age of ninety, leaving behind a collection of photographs and family documents, which Joanna Ostrowska bought from his neighbor in 2022. Souvenirs of a non-heteronormative episode appeared in the archive, like a film showing men kissing. Such unabashed documentation of queer* love is quite difficult to find before 1945.

— Verso: Dirk Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist* martyr, saves his pursuer in this etching from the *Martyrs Mirror*, 1685.

Glossary

Anabaptists: originating in the XVI century, Anabaptism is a Christian movement based on the belief that baptism should be a conscious choice made by the believer instead of an imposition administered at birth. Their alternative interpretation of scriptures made them a target for persecution from the official Church.

Cross-dressing: the act of wearing clothing traditionally associated with a gender different from one's own. It can be practiced for various reasons, for example for entertainment like in drag performances.

Drag: drag is a form of entertainment in which individuals dress up or present themselves differently than their everyday gender, usually to perform for an audience. The term drag queen typically denotes a man dressed in traditionally female clothing.

Heretics: followers of a religious doctrine that deviates from the orthodox (official) one. They are often persecuted in the effort to eradicate their deviance and non-conformity, seen as harmful to the order and authority of the Church.

Mennonites: direct descendants from the Anabaptists. Their denomination derives from Menno Simons, a Dutch priest who adhered to the anabaptist movement around 1536 to then form his own separate community. They were persecuted as heretics and had to build hideaway churches to practice their faith.

Paragraph 175 (of the German Penal Code): the statute of the German criminal code that banned sexual acts between men. It was established in 1871 and enforced from 1872, yet only removed from the code of Federal Republic of Germany in 1994. During the Nazi regime, the law was used to pursue and intern queer people in concentration camps.

Partisan: a member of a militant group established to resist the oppression of an authoritarian or occupying force. A partisan may use assorted strategies to overrule the dominator, like armed resistance, sabotaging, and espionage.

Prohibition: a period of US history from 1920 to 1933 in which the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages were heavily restricted. In response a contraband market flourished and what were called speakeasy clubs became a renowned meeting place to secretly consume spirits.

Queer: in the context of this exhibition it refers to the cultural output of people who recognize themselves in a broad spectrum of non-normative sexual or gender identities.

Wehrmacht: literally "defense force" the armed forces of Germany during the Nazi domination between 1935 and 1946.

William Blake: William Blake, born 1757 in London, was a visionary poet, painter, and printmaker. His mystic experiences often influenced his artistic production. Between his most notable works, we find *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and his prophetic books that illustrate an esoteric and personal view of biblical mythology.