

Mikołaj Szpaczyński
24 meters deep into the earth

The excavations of the cave, which I carried out as part of my doctoral dissertation, are a continuation of my artistic journey, in which I was less and less interested in creating works conceived and planned from beginning to end on my own; I was more and more interested in non-invasive co-creation with nature. I just wanted to go with the flow. All roads eventually led me to a clay-filled hole in a rock in a former quarry near my home in Jaworzno. It was a discovery that enabled me to do what I wanted to do. The balance of power changed by more than before. Nature did its work millions of years ago, I became nature's helper by discovering its work. I set out into the unknown - down the same road that water had once paved.

My painstaking excavations, which have been going on continuously since 2019, have led to the discovery of the space of a former cave that was silted with clay from the bottom to the ceiling and thus was hidden for hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of years before human existence until now. It is a capsule in which time and space have disappeared because of the dense mass of clay that fills it. At the moment I have excavated twenty-four meters of winding corridor leading deeper and deeper into the earth. This space was open to human eyes for the first time. It is the only cave that can be seen in Jaworzno and one of the few in the Silesian Highlands that is certainly the best preserved and unique of its kind. In fact, it is one of the few places in Poland that give an idea of what karst caves formed in the shell limestone of the Triassic Sea looked like.

The time and effort I spent studying the cave created a strong bond with it, which, in turn, made me want to know its history. To this end, I invited Dr. Andrzej Tyc from the Institute of Earth Sciences of the University of Silesia in Sosnowiec. At the moment, we know that the cave was formed in conditions of continuous flooding, which could have occurred in two periods: at the end of the Triassic (two hundred million years ago) or in the Miocene (twenty million years ago). At the end of the Miocene the cave could have been completely silted up by sediments (about five million years ago). The cave is an interesting object for research, and Dr. Tyc is interested in continuing it.

The second important person in my research group is speleologist Jarosław Surmacz, who helped me conduct specialized measurements, on the basis of which I made a professional plan of the cave - the most important document of its existence for publication in speleological journals.

An important effect of my activity is also the creation of a new space with an underground microclimate that has become a habitat for a constantly evolving cave fauna full of nocturnal butterflies, caddis flies, and arachnids.

The discovered cave is not only a monument of inanimate nature and an enclave of wildlife, but also a monument of love for the earth. Without this love, it would be impossible to see it.

In addition, a number of works have been created that document my experience - above all the process of excavating a cave, which as an artistic practice combines the sculptural struggle with matter, the tradition of land art, and performative traits.

Carving, video, 2019–2023

The video shows the moments of discovery of successive fragments of the walls and ceiling of the cave from my point of view. The recordings were made over a period of four years in different parts of the cave.

Chisel, object, 2019–2020

The working tool I dug the cave with. The handle of the chisel was covered with a thick hardened crust of clay that had been deposited in thin layers from my soiled hands. At the exhibition, as part of the doctoral dissertation defense, *Chisel* will be presented on a low cube, pointing the blade towards the video projection *Carving*.

Map, drawing on paper, 2019–2023

Map of the cave, which I drew on a sheet of A4 at the same time as the process of discovering the cave. After each working day, I added another newly discovered fragment to the map. Over time, the drawing spread to subsequent pages.

Continued, video, 2022

A report showing a day of my work in the cave.

Segments, sculpture series, from 2021

The building material of the sculptures is clay silt extracted from the cave. I return to it the shapes of selected sections of the corridors it fills. It would seem that the abstract sculptures are an exact reproduction of the form created by nature, transferring it from reality on a 1:1 scale. Because of the material and weight, these sculptures are ephemeral. They dry out, crack and exist only during the exhibition. At the moment I have made two sculptures: *Episode I* - on the occasion of the solo exhibition *Continuation* at BWA Contemporary Art Gallery in Katowice (12.02–21.03.2021) and *Episode II* at the collective exhibition *Something I Feel, Don't Know What* at Zachęta Project Room in Warsaw (02.07–12.09.2021). I plan to make the third episode on the occasion of the exhibition, which will be prepared for the defense of my doctoral dissertation.