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Theme 1. Artistic Practices

Towards nature – photography as a reflection on anthropocene

In November 2019, during the last days of the Biennale of Art Venice was flooded with an unusually high tide. Some pavilions were flooded and closed, the others, still open seemed to be saturated with water. The tide gave way after six hours, but the world instantly was flooded with another wave – media information and images on social media. Photographs showed tourists wading around in the water and residents persistently pumping water from the lower floors of buildings.

This clash of natural environment and cultural image was significant, especially because this year, during the exhibition, an extremely large number of projects commenting on climate change were shown. In my speech, I will look at selected practices of environmental photography and audiovisual works, wondering what the role and strength of contemporary artistic practices is when confronted with the processes of visible climate change.

In the paper I put the thesis that the most important function of artistic activities today is reflection on cultural, economic and social practices of anthropocene, leading to climate change. It is therefore this definition of environmental art, defined by T.J. Demos as “the practice that has to be brought together with aesthetics, ethics, and political science.” Similarly thinks Deborah J Haynes proposing a concept of “ethical aesthetics”. In her opinion, “we need visual art that is responsive to the intersection of the material, ethical, and aesthetic, and informed by an apocalyptic sensibility.”

Artists, thus, strive to identify the most important causes of today’s crises: excessive use of natural resources and document their consequences: global migration, economic and social inequalities, extinction of species.

The subject of my analysis will be selected audiovisual and photographic works, including Hito Steyerl, John Akomfrah, Subhankar Banerjee and Angelika Markul. These artists share a similar display technique – they use large-screen, multiplied projections and immersive artistic environments to create solemn images that embrace the viewer. It is, therefore, an approach that, by its impact, is intended to touch the recipient and to act more strongly than the Instagram account of the picturesquely flooded St. Mark.

Does it mean that art compete with view of ecological disaster in this way? Or if pictures, as W.J.T. Mitchell thought, can still make us do something? It's a matter of consideration.