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UNDERSTANDING WITH WATER: HYDRO-ART IN OSIEKI (1973)

Abstract: The paper is located at the intersection of the art history of the Polish neo-avant-garde and the environmental humanities informed by feminist new materialisms. It proposes an interpretation of performative works in which artists used aqueous matter as an object of interaction, a source of artistic transcription, and as an active participant in artistic scenarios. It concentrates on works that were realized during the open-air art meetings in socialist Poland and in particular at the Osieki meeting in 1973 with the title *The Art of Water Surfaces* [*Plastyka obszarów wodnych*]. Based on the analyzed works, it offers a speculative reflection on Hydroart, which is defined as region-specific development parallel to land art practices.

Keywords: art history, blue humanities, neo-avant-garde, plein-air, environmental art

The slight curve of the shell that holds just a little water, just a few seeds to give away and to receive, suggests stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, the worlding. With a shell and a net, becoming human, becoming humus, becoming terran, has another shape – that is the side winding, snaky shape of becoming with. To think-with is to stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth.¹

– Donna Haraway

Introduction

Looking at artworks and projects made in the past from the perspective of current urgencies can revive art and make it relevant again, but sometimes such an approach, making use of fashionable theoretical tools, can conceal the work behind ahistorical contemporary agendas. It is of course justified to make art ours by reading it for “here and now”. But art-historical reading – reading that acknowledges its own presentist

¹ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2016, p. 40.

perspective on past meanings, but aims to articulate the genealogies of the present – requires a constant solicitude for the otherness of “there and then”.

In this paper I perform an aqueous reading of art created by the Polish neo-avant-garde. Sensitized by the current debates within blue humanities, I look at the historical works in which artists used watery matter not as an object of representation but as a subject of interaction, as a source of artistic transcription and as an active participant in artistic scenarios. I go back to the archives of the neo-avant-garde with my watery tools to look again at works that were made in the 1970s during the open-air art meetings in socialist Poland, and particularly at the 1973 Osieki Meeting, entitled *The Art of Water Areas* [*Plastyka obszarów wodnych*].² I conclude this essay with a speculative reflection on hydro-art, based on the analysed works, which is defined as a region-specific development, parallel to the invasive and promethean practices of land art. Ultimately, I am less concerned with identifying watery motifs in the art of that time than with achieving a new understanding of this art: understanding with water.³

Aqueous Reading: A Proposition for Interpreting Art with Water

‘Reading with water’ is a figuration that helps to re-think an interpretative practice as a practice of knowing *from* and knowing *with*. Reading art with water has a history. For instance, in his 1957 article on the epistemic qualities of abstract art, Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990) illustrated his thesis not with an image of a contemporary painting, but with a photograph of “a stream of water captured at 1/50,000 second” to argue that “art allows vision otherwise inaccessible to human eye”⁴.

On the narrative level, aqueous reading approximates an object of study but does not determine its sharp edges; it rather connects *with* it, runs parallel, acknowledging other currents and stories that can be told with it. Aqueous reading is embedded in the idea of attentive and vulnerable listening/looking, and in the possibility of

² There are several different translations of this idiomatic title, such as “Models of Water Images” (Informator Osieki 1973 and R. Ziarkiewicz, M. Mikita (ed.), *Avant-garde in plein-air: Osieki and Łazy 1963–1981*, Muzeum Okręgowe, Koszalin 2008), “Art and Documentation” 2018, no. 18/1, pp. 59–72, and most recently: “The Art of Water Images” (Julia Ciunowicz, curatorial statement, exhibition *Out in the Fresh Air? Early Ecological Projects during Artistic Plein-Airs in Poland*, 29.02.–31.03.2020, Fundacja Arton, Warsaw). The translation proposed by me aims to reconstruct the meanings of the terms “plastyka” and “obszarów wodnych” as closely as possible to their historical meanings.

³ The text focuses on the interpretation of specific artistic realizations created in Osieki and does not portray the broader historical context of energy and water policies in Poland at that time. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that three of the five largest hydropower plants in Poland were put into operation in the years 1968–1971.

⁴ M. Moskalewicz, *Notation, Aspiration, Science, and Labour in Early Conceptual Art in Poland* [in:] Ch. Berger (ed.), *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2019, p. 110.

a “sweeping epistemological humiliation”.⁵ As Marsha Meskimmon eloquently put it, “knowing is never finished and there are no absolute coordinates but there are conversations to be joined”.⁶

The conversation I join here relates to the “oceanic turn” in the humanities, where concepts such as “hydro-criticism”, “hydro-logic”, “thinking with water” have been coined for the study of cultural/natural objects and for the analysis of current political conditions. In her introductory essay on the origins of blue humanities, Stacy Alaimo argues that the oceans provide us with new epistemic possibilities, new ways of thinking and making the world: “The fact that most of the ocean cannot be encountered directly by terrestrial humans means that the ocean and many of its species spark disciplinary, methodological, ontological, and epistemic questions and quandaries”.⁷

Similarly, in every work of art there are contingencies at play. As the artist Sheila Levrant de Bretteville put it, works of art are unstable signs.⁸ The watery reading does not aim to stabilize them but merely meander around them. It considers works of art as multi-genealogical and heterogeneous creations: the watery reconstruction of the meaning is a reconstruction of the fragments for the situated reader.

Aqueous reading is a strategy of staying connected to two shores at once – dwelling on the border between current and historical interpretative agendas. I want to see new aspects of the artworks, tell the stories of today with them, but also hear what they meant for the people who made and encountered them in the past. It is a strategy of wavering together contemporary urgencies and historical agendas in a fluid intimacy. It is a reading that allows different narrative strategies to mutually inform each other.

Reading with water also means a special focus on watery matter in art. Writing about the materiality of artistic practices, rethinking the “role of matter, materials and materiality in the production, reception and interpretation of art”⁹ is contemporary art historiography’s response to the “material turn.” Today’s “oceanic turn” or “the blue humanities” represent a specific articulation of the “material turn.” In this case, the path beyond dualities towards a non-oppositional ontology runs through the water.

Here, I am concerned with watery matter in neo-avant-garde art, a form of art which aims to undermine the materiality of the artwork. The neo-avant-garde movement was characterized by the practice of moving away from the production of art

⁵ D. Graham Barnett, *The Sounding of the Whale: Science and Cetaceans in the Twentieth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012, p. 672, qtd [in:] S. Alaimo, *Introduction: Science Studies and the Blue Humanities*, “Configurations” 2019, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 429–432. *Project MUSE*, DOI:10.1353/con.2019.0028, p. 429 (accessed: 13.06.2021).

⁶ M. Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms, Transversal Politics and Art: Entanglements and Intersections*, Routledge, London–New York 2020, p. 3.

⁷ S. Alaimo, *Introduction: Science Studies...*, op. cit., p. 430.

⁸ Center for the Study of Political Graphics CSPG, *Decade of Dissent – Sheila Levrant De Bretteville*, YouTube, 24.03.2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNDa2RD0aS0 (accessed: 27.07.2021).

⁹ Ch. Berger, *Introduction: Conceptualism and Materiality. Matters of Art and Politics* [in:] Ch. Berger (ed.), *Conceptualism and Materiality...*, op. cit., p. 3.

objects towards formats that played with the idea of dematerialization in a variety of ways. Contemporary interpretations focus their attention on the historicity of this term and emphasize that any artistic practice, even ephemeral and processual, is embedded in particular materialities.

In his reflections on the genealogy of the notion of dematerialisation of art coined by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in their eponymous 1968 essay,¹⁰ Christian Berger convincingly reconstructs the historical sources and long tradition that informed Lippard and Chandler's use of the term "dematerialisation". "Dematerialisation" in their text appears as "an optical effect realized through technical means" or, alternatively, as a result of certain material strategies, "but ultimately occurs in the process of reception and not in the object itself."¹¹ Berger concludes that "dematerialisation" was an "elastic concept" genealogically related to the idealist tradition as well as to the avant-garde re-thinking of the new conditions of life and communication.¹² In the former socialist Europe, the concept of dematerialisation assumed a particular anti-productivist dimension. Leading art critic and theoretician Jerzy Ludwiński (1930–2000) "advocated for the dematerialisation of art as a moral response to the productivist model, stating provocatively that it is *important to create as little as possible*".¹³

Matter, however, did not disappear during the conceptual process of art's reinvention. It was merely re-positioned from being negated as an artistic object to being embraced within the artistic process. The conceptual works of the 60s – "analytical and rational" – often relied on "the palpable materiality of the object," while also being characterized by the internal tension between material and conceptual qualities.¹⁴ In contrast, the processual and performative realizations of the 70s incorporated the active body of the artist and were created in relation with and to materiality as well as to wet matter.

The works of art that I'm focusing on here didn't only incorporate wet matter into their structures or rely on hydro-iconographies, but were made in a context in which water and its materiality were unambiguously placed at the center of art production. Donna Haraway writes that in narratives of history (thus also art history) we have to deal with a constantly repeated "hunter story where everything else is just a prop".¹⁵ With aqueous reading, I aim to re-locate the water into the centre of the story.

¹⁰ L. Lippard, J. Chandler, *The Dematerialization of Art*, "Art International" 1968, vol. 12, no. 2.

¹¹ Ch. Berger, *Past and Present Trajectories of a 'Dematerialization' of Art* [in:] Ch. Berger (ed.), *Conceptualism and Materiality...*, op. cit., p. 31.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ M. and R. Fowkes, *I Live on Earth: Cosmic Realms and the Place of Nature in the Work of Natalia LL* [in:] A. Jakubowska (ed.), *Natalia LL: Consumer Art and Beyond*, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw 2016, p. 111.

¹⁴ M. Moskalewicz, *Notation, Aspiration, Science...*, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁵ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble...*, op. cit., p. 39.

Making and Doing Art Close to Water

The process of redefining art from the practice of making media-specific objects (paintings, sculptures, etc.) to process and project-oriented thinking took place in certain art infrastructures such as artist-run galleries and artistic meetings, academic symposia and artistic plein-air exhibitions that not only facilitated the transformation of art in the 60s and 70s, but also influenced the new material formats and transdisciplinary theoretical perspectives on art. In the 1960s, these infrastructures were also transformed and de-traditionalized by following, on the one hand, the imperative of socialist modernization and, on the other, the artistic urge to experiment and to be up to date with scientific and social developments. A specific case of this infrastructure were artistic open-air symposia in which natural environments such as sea, lakes, rivers, forests, meadows, strands and caves were used or involved in doing, showing and theorizing art.

The proliferation of artistic open-air meetings in the 60s and 70s in socialist Poland has been interpreted as a part of the state's conscious cultural policy aimed at decentralising artistic culture, a form of its control and appropriation, including using experimental art for official propaganda purposes.¹⁶ These specific hybrid places of leisure and work, observation and participation, have been denounced as “reservoirs of freedom.” “Freedom in the open-air reserve,” writes Luisa Nader, was “simulated freedom”.¹⁷ Nevertheless the possibility of making art together, outside of the studio, in/with the natural environment, very often alongside engaged audience of theoreticians, philosophers and scientists has often become a compost for an intellectual ferment. The complex political entanglements of these events have been discussed and recognized, and is easy to see them today as zones of negotiation of different interests. Here I am interested in an under-researched aspect of these negotiations, namely negotiations between artistic and non-artistic actors: between artists and water, the latter having been incorporated initially as a subject, background, scenography or prop, and ultimately as an actor of “plain-art-made-art”.

Artistic plein-air exhibitions, introduced to artistic culture first in France in the mid-19th century, offered their participants not only the opportunity to draw from so-called nature, but also an embodied contact with watery and not-watery matter. Around the same time, a group of artists initiated the first act of nature conservation, “revealing that art and ecology effectively embraced from the outset of modern environmental aware-

¹⁶ For example, to celebrate the return of the so-called Recovered Territories (Ziemie Odzyskane) to Poland after WW2. See: P. Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, Reaktion Books, London 2009.

¹⁷ L. Nader, *W stronę krytyki wizualności. VIII Spotkanie Artystów i Teoretyków Sztuki w Osiekach / Towards Criticism of the Visual. The 8th Meeting of Artists and Theoreticians in Osieki* [in:] *Awangarda w plenerze: Osieki i Łazy 1963–1981...*, op. cit., p. 84.

ness”.¹⁸ Nevertheless, artistic plein-air was conceived as anthropocentric festivals that addressed merely the perceptual experience privileged in modernist aesthetics in the creation of the visual arts and their theory. Paradoxically, it was the professionalization and commercialization of the artistic industry that brought artists into non-urban settings. The opportunity to buy ready-made mixed paints created the possibility to focus on the activity of painting, rather than on the process of making materials. Once the painter lost contact with the materiality of art-making, with the messiness of pigments and the heaviness of canvas, she was pushed back outdoors – to watch the light, to observe the weather, to depict water, but not to touch.

The open-air artistic meetings that were organized in socialist Poland referred directly to this tradition, enriching it with socialist slogans of productivity,¹⁹ the utility of art, and its integration with society. The official ideology propagated by the organizers (the local and central administration) was met with the expectations, ideas and capacities of invited artists and theoreticians who negotiated *in situ* their practices. The well documented and researched history of the longest-running open-air symposiums in Osieki (1963–1981), initiated by Jerzy Fedorowicz, Ludmiła Popiel, and Marian Bogusz, is an interesting example of such a dynamic.

The meanings of the International Meetings of Artists, Scientists and Art Theorists in Osieki was determined by the historical and cultural politics of the socialist government, but was also constructed in the context of a particular natural environment.²⁰ Osieki with its Jamno Lake and the neighboring coastal village of Łazy were the places where the most recognizable water-iconographies and water-works of the Polish neo-avant-garde were created. Notable among these was Tadeusz Kantor’s “Panoramic See Happening” (1967) that consisted of four parts: *Sea Concert*, *Erotic Barbuyage*, *Agrarian Culture on the Sand*, and *Medusa Raft*.

Even though the open-air meetings in Osieki were originally organized to produce art objects, especially paintings, which later enriched the local art collection,²¹

¹⁸ In 1852, the painter Théodore Rousseau sent a letter to Napoleon III, following which “a decree was issued with recommendation that areas of special interest for artists should be left unmanaged”. M. Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Central European University Press, Budapest–New York 2015, p. 1.

¹⁹ Jerzy Szwej in his monography of Osieki meetings scrupulously reports how many works (paintings) were executed each year and comments if the given plainer was a “hard working” event. See J. Szwej, *Plenery w Osiekach*, Muzeum Okręgowe, Koszalin 1978.

²⁰ Writing about the origin of the Osieki meetings from the perspective of 1978, Jerzy Szwej argues that an artistic tradition has been constructed in Osieki from the scratch, that the cultural history of this place begins only after 1945 when the pioneering artists from various parts of Poland come not so much to respond to local needs, but to create them. This view reflects the official cultural policy. See: J. Szwej, *Plenery w Osiekach*, op. cit., pp. 8–9.

²¹ For more about Osieki collection see for instance: J. Zagrodzki, *Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej według założenia Mariana Bogusza / Premises for a Museum of Modern Art by Marian Bogusz*, pp. 15–27, and D. Jarecka, *Mała utopia awangardy. „Kolekcja Studio” i „Kolekcja Osiecka” jako lokalne zawiązki muzeów sztuki współczesnej / Small Utopia of the Avant-Garde. The Collections of both the Studio Gallery in Warsaw and Koszalin Museum Seen as Local Initiatives for the Foundation*

the problem of integrating art and life was always the central axis around which the artistic program of the meetings was created. Therefore, strategies such as open studios, art exhibitions in local galleries, meetings with students, teachers and tourists, lectures and sightseeing tours were used. One of the tactics of going out “with art to society” was advertising in public space.²² These strategies of placing art in public space and incorporating physical space into art took place in parallel to the developments within artistic practices that moved towards formats such as environment, action, situation, happenings and performance – i.e. an artistic proposition where the artist’s body in the real space is the medium of meaning production. This tendency towards the de-materialisation of the art-object, accompanied by a re-materialisation of the context for artistic action, was made particularly manifested during the VIII Meetings in Osieki in 1970 entitled *Propositions*, where creating objects (paintings) was not any longer a matter of discussion.

Luiza Nader interprets this meeting as a continuation of the deliberations that started in February in Wrocław during the symposium Wrocław 70, later historicized as the symbolic beginning of conceptual art in Poland.²³ Jerzy Ludwiński and Bożena Kowalska were responsible for the concept and program of the meeting:

The lectures and discussions taking place during the plein-air referred to the reflection on the need to change the concepts, categories and paradigms related to contemporary artistic practice (...). The artistic suggestions raised criticism of representation by redefining of the concepts of author, works of art, and artistic practice. Some of them accentuated the material aspects of language, distorting the relationship between the significant and signified. The others critically assess the widely understood field of vision and administering institutions.²⁴

Nader also analyses Ludwiński’s lecture *The Post-Artistic Age*, delivered during this meeting, interpreting it as a genealogical source of polish artistic experimental art practices of the 70s and emphasizing Ludwiński’s idea of finally overcoming the

of Contemporary Art Museums in Poland, pp. 95–109, both in “Art and Documentation” 2018, no. 18/1.

²² During the 4th Osieki Meeting, for example, an exhibition of works from the previous edition of Osieki was shown in the shop windows in Koszalin and the event was also popularized by poster campaign and TV program.

²³ Nader points to the fact that the list of the participating artists was almost identical with the list of Wrocław 70. She also convincingly argues that the specific character of this meeting was due to the organisational chaos resulting from conflicts among the organizers, L. Nader, *W stronę krytyki wizualności...*, op. cit., p. 66.

²⁴ During this important edition of Osieki, Zdzisław Jurkiewicz created his well known tautological work *White Thin Canvas*, which, in addition to an adequately signed canvas, contains photographic documentation depicting a female model wrapped in canvas. Other works aimed at documenting the idea through its specific materialization included Marianna Michałowska’s *One Week in Osieki* or the action “A-B” by Jerzy Fedorowicz and Ludmiła Popiel. According to Nader, the new function of an artist has been redefined and reworked here. The author writes: “The function of artist was not the creation of objects, but indicating concepts; not delivery of a work, but indifferent documentation of an idea.” L. Nader, *W stronę krytyki wizualności...*, op. cit., p. 77.

high/low distinction in culture and the boundary between art and life²⁵ within his concept of “impossible art”, i.e. art which is a series of artistic facts created in the process of thinking, realized in the imagination. In another text, Nader demonstrates that the artistic projects presented during the VIII Meeting in Osieki constituted a direct response to a number of Ludwiński’s postulates.²⁶ What interests me here is the resonance of Ludwiński’s thesis for the program of the forthcoming Osieki Meetings and, more precisely: how Ludwiński’s reflections on merging art and life and using art *for* life influenced works created within Osieki’s infrastructure during the series of meetings that focused on ecological issues.

Three editions of the Osieki Meetings in 1972, 1973 and 1974, themed, respectively, *Art and Science in the Process of Protecting Human Field of Vision*, *The Art of Water Areas*, and *The Artist and the Earth 400,000 Km Afar*, were devoted to environmental damage and the planetary perspective and can be interpreted as a site-specific response to the concept of “art in the post-artistic era”.²⁷ They were also responding to the need to re-think the model of the symposium that lasted for a decade and culminated in the aforementioned 1970 plein-air when it was questioned.

On the one hand, the ecological editions of Osieki posed a new questions, already explored during the first decade of the Osieki Meetings, about the social role of art, the integration of art and life, and the common goals of art and science. On the other hand, they focused on artistic working with, within and for the environment. They can be read as implementations of Ludwiński’s postulate that art must respond to the most important phenomena of reality and that artists must “conduct research, be revolutionists, create new worlds of nature and objects”.

During these three editions of the Osieki Meetings, “impossible art” became part of an interdisciplinary practice of environmentalism. Focusing on local problems meant not merely proposing an open criticism of the productivist utopia and of the industrial modernization promoted by the Party, but also proposing some effective strategies of both locality-oriented activism²⁸ and of the materialist practice that repositions human- and non-human relations. Or, as Bruno Latour would put it, it meant to tell “Gaia Stories”, in which “former props and passive agents have become active without, for that, being part of a giant plot written by some overseeing entity”.²⁹

²⁵ Jerzy Ludwiński’s text based on the lecture was published in the catalogue *Concept Art [Sztuka Pojęciowa]*, December 1970 Wrocław and subsequently in “Odra” 1971, no. 4, p. 51–56.

²⁶ L. Nader, *W stronę krytyki wizualności...*, op. cit.

²⁷ The meeting of 1971 had merely a local character and took place not in Osieki, but in Creative Work Centre in Ustka.

²⁸ Eco-activist works realized in 1972 included the joint action of Jerzy Treliński with Andrzej Pierzgański entitled *Mandating/Mandatowanie*, that consisted in handing out fines for polluting the environment to car owners. Zygmunt Wujek invited local residents to participate in the presentation of the *Statue of Wood* in cast iron, which took place on the bridge over the River Dzierżęcinka.

²⁹ Bruno Latour, Gifford Lectures, *Lecture 3: The Puzzling Face of a Secular Gaia, a quotation from the lecture manuscript in D. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble...*, op. cit., p. 40–44.

These three eco-editions of Osieki were not isolated acts of collective articulation of ecological concerns, but rather part of a broader wave of interest in working with ecological topics. Other events that were at the time concerned with anthropogenic impacts on nature, questioning especially the benefits of accelerated industrialisation, included: the 1st Symposium of Artists and Scientists *Art in the Changing World* in Puławy, 1966 and the *Ziemia Zgorzelecka – 1971* open-air meeting titled *Art and Science in the Process of Protecting Human Natural Environment*.³⁰

Maja Fowkes has convincingly argued that artistic practices concerned with ecology in East-Central Europe should be interpreted within the framework of the regional political and economic context. “The treatment of the environment during actually existing socialism,” writes Fowkes, “was determined by the regimes preoccupation with progress, industrialisation, and modernisation, and as a result socialist countries drew freely on natural resources, perceiving them as limitless”.³¹ In her curatorial statements that accompanied a recent exhibition devoted to the issue of ecological art in socialist Poland, Julia Ciunowicz specified that this framework referred to the Polish policy and its determination to “catch up” with the West through the development of the coal industry, the environmental consequence of which was that the “levels of coal extraction were the greatest in history, reaching even 200 million tons a year, and new mines dotted the landscape of Silesia”. The location of the Osieki open-air meetings, however, laid out a different form and focus of commitment to the environment, namely the emphasis on the deterioration and pollution of water areas by industrialization and tourism.

Osieki 1973: *The Art of Water Areas* [*Plastyka obszarów wodnych*]

Throughout the history of the Osieki Meetings, artistic practice has been defined in the official statements as one that shares goals with science. This approach was characteristic of both official cultural rhetoric and of artistic practices enchanted with science in the form of the concept of artistic experiment. Accordingly, during the 1972–74 editions of the Osieki Meetings, the artist was not positioned as someone who works in an autonomous sphere in nature, but rather as a “constructor of the visual sphere”, and as a rescuer of the “human field of vision”.³² During Osieki 1973, entitled *Plastyka obszarów wodnych*, the artist-activist was positioned specifically in front and against the water. The organizers were expecting “the artist and the society

³⁰ A recent research exhibition *Out in the Fresh Air? Early Ecological Projects during Artistic Plein-Airs in Poland* at the Arton Foundation in 2020 curated by Julia Ciunowicz presented and problematized works and documentation from these events.

³¹ M. Fowkes, *The Green Bloc...*, op. cit., p. 11.

³² Brochure: Informator Osieki 1973.

to be sensitized to the problems related to the creative use of water resources.”³³ We can treat these official statements as more or less ritual declarations that proclaim the usefulness of art and establish a rather cumbersome and enigmatic bond between aqueous and artistic matter. But we can also see it as a performative utterance that creates certain conditions for the production and consumption of art.

The environmental focus on water protection was already signaled in some actions realized in 1972 during the edition: *Art and Science in the Process of Protecting Human Field of Vision*. One of them was the petition *LET’S PROTECT THE POLISH LANDSCAPE* signed by all participating artists and focused on the issue of protecting the landscape of Lake Bobęcińskie.³⁴ The following year, Osieki plein-air was conceived as a continuation and specification of the 1972 meeting.

The 11th Meeting of Artists, Scientists and Art Theoreticians in Osieki, which lasted from August 12th to 26th, 1973 was organized by a painter Marek Łęgowski in the capacity of commissar/curator. Thirty-five artists and six scientists and art theoreticians took part in the meeting,³⁵ referring in their works and actions to the topic of the “creative use of water resources.” In his monograph on the Osieki meetings Jerzy Szwej scrupulously noted that 60 paintings were executed during the plein-air, and were subsequently presented at regional exhibitions.³⁶

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ The letter reads: “The social value of the means of production is the basic tenet of socialism. We believe that the human natural environment – forests, water, air – deserve a similar treatment. Meanwhile, more and more often you see lakes, beaches and forest areas fenced and marked with signs prohibiting entry. One of the most beautiful landscape fragments of the Koszalin Province is Lake Bobęcińskie. Recently, the most charming part of the lake was annexed by one of Szczecinek’s industrial plants, making it a closed area. We know cases where entire stretches of the country were devastated by unreasonable buildings (e.g. Mostowo). It is to be feared that the vicinity of Lake Bobęcińskie will also be inaccessible to citizens, disfigured and barren. At the moment when the threat to the natural environment of man becomes one of the central threats to the country and the entire globe, and when special offices are created to prevent it, this peculiar invasion of Lake Bobęcińskie is a clear example of the opposite tendency. Therefore, we ask competent people to look into this matter and prevent irreparable, possibly damage. MEETING PARTICIPANTS – OSIEKI 72. SCIENCE AND ART IN THE PROCESS OF PROTECTING THE AREA OF HUMAN VISION – 56 signatures of participants of the tour.”

³⁵ The artists listed in the catalogue Osieki 1973 include: Kazimierz Cebula, Jan Chwałczyk, Tadeusz Ciesiulewicz, Jan Dobson Dobkowski, Ludmiła Popiel-Fedorowicz, Jerzy Fedorowicz, Stanisław Fijałkowski, Wanda Gałkowska, Zdzisław Kaładkiewicz, Zdzisława Kolk, Zygmunt Kotlarczyk, Stefan Krygier, Bolesław Kurzawinski, Katarzyna Żerdzicka-Łęgowska, Marek Łęgowski, Andrzej Matuszewski, Verner Merved, Paweł Niedzielski, Leszek Okołów, Mieczysław Olszewski, Andrzej Pawłowski, Mieczysław Piotrowski, Flemming Rodian, Zofia Rybiańska, Marek Sapetto, Aleksandra Sięnkowska, Ryszard Siennicki, Kajetan Sosnowski, Marián Sučanský, Wiesław Szamborski, Tommy Willumsen, Atanazy Wiśniewski, Krzysztof Zarębski, Jan Ziemski. The scientist listed in the catalogue: prof. dr Tadeusz Bartkowski, prof. Janusz Bogucki, dr Andrzej Goldman, dr Maciej Gutowski, mgr Jerzy Ludwiński, prof. dr Andrzej Rzymkowski. Commissar of the meeting: Leonid Kabaciński; artistic director: Marek Łęgowski.

³⁶ J. Szwej, *Plenery w Osiekach*, op. cit., p. 56.

Apart from the paintings, several actions worked with water in a hydro-critical manner and used work of water to reposition and rearticulate human/not-human relationships. In this context, it is worth mentioning the work *Window Threadaoid* [*Niciowec okienny*] realized by an artist Włodzimierz Borowski (1930–2008) together with the Lake Jamno in Osieki in 1967. Borowski immersed a triple glazed window with threads attached to it in the lake and had it fished out in the dusk, and subsequently displayed the transformed and organically animated object on a wooden pole. This action, entitled *Taking off the Hat*, which aimed to demystify the modernist mythology of art, can retrospectively be understood as a source of the local tradition of working with water which was explored during the 1973 Osieki meeting.

As every year in Osieki, apart from making and discussing art, participants took part in several country trips and landscape tours to the Pomeranian Lake District and Koszalin Seashore, this time focused exclusively on the issue of regional water bodies, their aesthetic and economic values, and their protection. The program also included a series of scientific lectures on topics such as *Management of the water reservoirs of Central Pomerania* (Jerzy Goldmann), *Water as an element of urbanized space* (Andrzej Rzymkowski) and *About the attractiveness of the geographical environment for recreation* (Tadeusz Bartkowski). Other lectures, by art theorists, discussed the subject of the evaluation and the value of art, rather than directly responding to the water call of the plein-air. Maciej Gutowski spoke about *Certain Problems of Evaluation in Art* and Jerzy Ludwiński about *Misunderstandings and Misconceptions in Polish Contemporary Art*.

Watery-artistic entanglements were articulated directly in art projects carried out in the form of actions performed within or with water.³⁷ In some cases, artists merely extended their ongoing projects enriching them with watery contexts. Andrzej Matuszewski (1924–2008) realized *10th Parallel Action* entitled *Conditioned System* during which the artist sunk an object (red chair) into Lake Jamno. Ludmiła Popiel (1929–1988) and Jerzy Fedorowicz (1928–2018) arranged a complex delegated action *Objective Landscape* which focused on representational technologies of art and articulated the impossibility of the objective notation of reality, using the watery landscape of Lake Jamno as an active subject.³⁸ Within this work, a canvas was

³⁷ In 1973, seven artistic actions were carried out by J. Chwałczyk, J. Dobkowski, L. Popiel, J. Fedorowicz, A. Matuszewski, A. Wiśniewski, K. Zarębski (J. Szwej, *Plenery w Osiekach*, op. cit., p. 56). One more artistic activity dates back to 1973, but it was most probably realized in 1974. It is worth to mention it here due to its water theme. In a collective action Jerzy Treliński, Andrzej Pierzgałski, Mirosław Piechura, and Ewa Czerniecka realized a work “Raking the Lake”, as well as multi-stage collective performance that explored the watery language: “It overflows, leaks, drips, splashes”, which consisted of four stages: (1) distribution of cards with the words in the title; (2) an exhibition of leaflets stuck to the walls of the building; (3) imprinting a stamp on the forehead with the word “secret”; (4) pouring water on a white canvas on a stretcher with the word “open”, as an illustration of the title slogans.

³⁸ Amy Bryzgel described this action in details: “Six participants are instructed to hold a blank canvas in front of them, with their backs to the shoreline of the lake, while two participants mark the line of

transformed from a space of registration or envisioning the landscape into a space of an intra-action with the watery surroundings and its self-transcription. This action can also be understood as a critique of plein-air practice, as a critique of working in natural surroundings with an artistic apparatus in order to helplessly capture so-called nature, positioned as something ahistorical and objective.

In another and much more intimate performative work, Krzysztof Zarębski (b. 1939) incorporated water as an active ingredient. In his two actions from the series *Line and the Body*, the artist inscribed his own body into the body of water, submerging it into the Lake Jamno. In an accompanying text entitled *Exercises*, he explained a contingent character of the work “with the Lake Jamno, white tape and white paint in a tube” and positioned it close to artistic research rather than defining it as a final work. Alicja Kepinska (1932–2019) interpreted this work as a preparation stage for the later series *Zones of Contact*, actions carried out since 1974 that were characterized by “operating with the natural matter of the environment, especially the substances of nature”.³⁹ *Zones of Contact* was about creating an alternative, embodied and ephemeral ways of connecting with people and the world. In his statements, the artist often emphasized a vision of the world as a connected unity, locating human actors as equals among other natural elements. In 1978 he introduced live leeches to his work that drank his blood during the performance (*Transmisja*). What was at stake in Osieki’s performative research was the examination of the human body as an instrument for such potentially trans-corporeal connections, in this case with watery matter.

In these works, the work of water was included in artistic scenarios, but controlled and subordinated to the artist’s agenda. Although the works did consider more-than-human relations, we can define them as human-centric, or even art-centric as in the Popiel/Fedorowicz case.

One realization which significantly differed from this anthropocentric approach was Jan Dobkowski’s (b. 1942) *Lake Stocking* action, also referred to as “The Interpenetration of Art with Nature” [Przenikanie się sztuki z przyrodą].⁴⁰ Anna Maria Leśniewska described the action in her essay on the performisation of art at Osieki:

the horizon on the canvases – across all six – with a piece of string, the position of which is verified through a camera lens. On the day of the performance, the participants are given the canvases at 11:45 a.m.; at 11:55 a.m. the horizon is marked with a piece of string; it is verified through the lens at 11:58, and at noon, a “trace” of the horizon line is left on the canvasses in the form of that string. Later, the artists paint the bottom of the canvasses blue, demarcating the separation between skyline and earth. The action attempts to confront perception with reality – the perception of the horizon line and its reality in one’s field of vision and on the canvas, as captured by the artist-participants. See: A. Bryzgel, *Blurring the Boundaries: Perception, Reality, Performance. Works of Ludmila Popiel and Jerzy Fedorowicz*, “BLOCK Magazine”, <https://blokmagazine.com/blurring-the-boundaries-perception-reality-performance-works-of-ludmila-popiel-and-jerzy-fedorowicz/> (accessed: 24.06.2021).

³⁹ A. Kępińska, *Nowa Sztuka, Sztuka Polska w latach 1945–78*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1981, p. 236. After *Awangarda w plenerze: Osieki i Łazy 1963–1981...*, op. cit., p. 246.

⁴⁰ J. Szwej, *Plenery w Osiekach*, op. cit., p. 57.

The artist and his wife Maria took a boat to the middle of the biologically dead Lake Jamno, where they ‘let out’ the previously prepared by Dobkowski 118 forms – fish-women and small fish-cuts. The figures were cut by hand from chipboard and painted yellow. The forms drifted on the surface symbolically enlivening the reservoir. The waves carried them to the coast, where they were picked up by the viewers of the action. The sketch of the action can be found in the notebook of the artist from December 1968 under the slogan ‘fertilizing the river with fish from plywood’.⁴¹

The artist himself retrospectively interprets his intentions and motivations as follows:

Lake Jamno, near the grounds of the Osieki plein-airs, was where wastewater was disposed of, so no fish lived there. So I stocked the lake with art. I drew forms on a board, a carpenter cut them, and I painted them lemon because I wanted harmony with the color of the sky. Those were fish, fish-tits, and other such petty creatures, more than a hundred in total. We set out on a boat with Maja and threw the forms into the lake. They later came to the shore. The audience would go into the water and take them out, after which they hung them on tree branches – many people took them with them. Nothing stayed in the lake; no rubbish was left. That was my protest against industry. Only now do we begin to talk about it more. The problem with humans and machines is topical in all my art. You can come to terms with death. Everybody dies. But you can live a better life.⁴²

This well-documented work can be productively read with contemporary theoretical tools and the fertile language of new materialist criticism, allowing some new meanings to flow. However, I would first like to place this action in the historical context of Dobkowski’s artistic practice, in order to demonstrate that the posthumanist reading is not merely a matter of following contemporary interpretative trends, but is a reading that arises from the questions that are at the center of this practice.

The artist began his training as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1962 and entered the Jan Cybis (1897–1972) studio in his third year, only to rebel against his teacher’s modernist approach.⁴³ Already then, Dobkowski began to rethink the relationship between art and nature within the discourse and practice of painting, and to produce linear, flat compositions that depicted intricate, colourful, often erotic anthropomorphic organisms. Around 1969, Dobkowski replaced canvases with actual space, releasing his figures, such as *Omnipresent [Wszeczbędąca]*, into the interiors of factories (presentation in “Polfa” Tarchomin Pharmaceutical Works, Warsaw, November–December 1969), galleries (exhibition in Contemporary Gallery, Warsaw, March 1974) and natural surroundings (an action called *A Prolongment of*

⁴¹ A.M. Leśniewska, *Przekształcanie porządku. Osiecka performatyzacja sztuki według Jana Dobkowskiego / Transformation of Order: Introducing the Performisation of Art at Osieki According to Jan Dobkowski*, “Art and Documentation” 2018, no. 18/1, p. 64.

⁴² M. Dobkowska, *You Can Live a Better Live: A Conversation with Jan Dobkowski* [in:] M. Kuźmicz (ed.), *Jan Dobkowski*, Fundacja Arton, Warsaw 2020, p. 146.

⁴³ Jan Cybis was one a leading theorist and practitioner of Kapizm/Colorism, a postimpressionist trend that dominated in Polish art from the 1920s onwards.

the Summer, 1969). In her essay on Dobkowski's relationship with space, Marika Kuźmicz emphasizes a transformative agenda of his actions, arguing that "Dobkowski continued to "set forth" into space – individually and in a variety of media, or rather to "populate" it, as he would say – to organize and create it".⁴⁴

Working with the actual physical space enables embodied and non-speculative contact with the environment. Jakub Dąbrowski, in his historicising essay, contextualizes Dobkowski's interest in the natural environment by locating it in proximity with the hippie subculture.⁴⁵ Dąbrowski argues that the artist "appreciated the ideas of the "flower children" their (...) affirmation of corporeality and sexuality as natural components of humanity and the sign of a return to lost freedom and happiness".⁴⁶ In another excellent interpretative essay, Post Brothers investigates the meaning of constant metamorphosis and interrelations of the polymorphic figurations created by Dobkowski and interprets them as an artistic embracement of a world in flux, of a world-in-becoming.⁴⁷ He argues that Dobkowski's work refuses "divides between matter and energy, body and mind, space and time, masculine and feminine, living and non-living, human and non-human, and even between organisms and their environments",⁴⁸ locating the conceptual origin of Dobkowski's figures in archaic formlessness. The author supports his new materialist reading with the artist's words emphasizing that "[i]n numerous statements, the artist has asserted that his use of the human body has been in aid of erasing the divide between humans and what is referred to as *nature*".⁴⁹

Dobkowski's fluid critters and their symbiotic assemblages populating canvases and the physical space can be, after Donna Haraway, described as "holoents". Haraway uses this term "to replace self-sufficient "units" and "beings"⁵⁰ and to articulate the mutable poliformism of life, a mutually creative sympoetic relation between heterogeneous parts of the world that constitute life. With "holoents" comes therefore a particular model of the world: a dynamic world in which life is created through "partial connections." "To be animal," writes Haraway, "is to become—with bacteria (and no doubt, viruses and many other sort of critters; a basic aspect of sympoesis is its expandable set of players)".⁵¹ Sympoesis as "making with," represented by Dobkowski's holoents reminds us that "nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic

⁴⁴ M. Kuźmicz, *In Space* [in:] M. Kuźmicz (ed.), *Jan Dobkowski*, op. cit., p. 128.

⁴⁵ J. Dąbrowski, *Between Colorism and "Modernity" – on Jan Dobkowski's Early Works* [in:] M. Kuźmicz (ed.), *Jan Dobkowski*, op. cit., pp. 107–124, Dąbrowski also emphasizes that, when Dobkowski participated for the first time in an exhibition abroad in 1968, he was recognized as a "flower child" painter (at the Sveagalleriet in Stockholm). See *ibidem*, p. 121.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Post Brothers, *A Polymorphous Disposition* [in:] M. Kuźmicz (ed.), *Jan Dobkowski*, op. cit., p. 92.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

⁵⁰ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble...*, op. cit., p. 60.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

or self-organising”.⁵² Nothing but water, a matter that facilitates the ongoing cycle of transcorporeal creation.

The existence of life and lifelines depends on the presence of clean water. In his painterly works, such as the early gouache *Coral Reef* (1958) or the acrylic paintings from the series *Ocean* (1988), Dobkowski created watery lively worlds, where “critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and though one another (...) and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblage”.⁵³ For his action in Osieki, Dobkowski chosen a zone of expulsion of life – a man-made dead zone – and staged there an enactment of the broken circle of life. Today, dead zones have become commonplace in the dying ocean, constituting “the most brutal instance of the destruction or degradation of water bodies”⁵⁴: the watery environments of Anthropocene extinctions. Dobkowski worked on a local scale with the fragility and deaths caused by human practices in Lake Jamno. Populating dead water with holoents, he created the hybrid advocated by Ludwiński, a “new world of nature and objects,” to rethink the ethics of human actions towards water. At the same time, he provided for the audience the opportunity to assume an active position towards water and its deadness, to perceive the lake as a “vanishing point of nature”.⁵⁵ His action can be seen as an attempt at staying with the troubles as a matter of cultivating discomfort – with water.

Dobkowski returned to watery matter on several occasions. In 1974, he realized *Firstborn*, an action by the Zegrze Reservoir where once again he placed several figures in the water and on the surrounding trees. In 1980, he realized the installation *The River Bank* in Łomża, marking the river bank with fire. On one level, Dobkowski’s watery works can be seen as a part of his broader investigation into primordial nature, depicted by the artist in his oil painting *Pre-nature* (1977). In these actions, he dealt with the becoming and transformation of material elements and substances as he mobilized fire (*Burning Square*, International Meeting Artists, Scientists and Art Theorists in Osieki, 1978), air (*Drawing of the Wind*, 1978, 6th Festival of Fine Arts in Warsaw) and soil (*Birth by the Earth*, Miastko, 1981). On another level, Dobkowski’s hydro-works can be seen as a model for a more general trend of environmental art developed in relation to water in East-Central Europe.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 58.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Saskia Sassen writes that “is the existence of an estimated 400 dead zones in the world’s oceans, comprising an area of more than 245,000 square kilometres. A range of human practices including agricultural pollution, play a key role in this, one of the most extreme forms of environmental degradation. The zones are suffering from hypoxia, a lack of the oxygen necessary to sustain life.” S. Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2014, p. 187.

⁵⁵ L. Winkiel, *Introduction*, “English Language Notes” 2019, vol. 57, no. 1 (April), Special Issue, ed. L. Winkiel, p. 2.

Hydro-art

Socialist Europe was by no means a homogeneous cultural space, and treating it as a unit is an operation that always borders on strategic essentialism and requires a few words of explanation.⁵⁶ In this case, the main common horizon relates to the socialist state's ideology of productivism, as well as to the special conditions of artistic production in East-Central Europe. In socialist Europe, experimental neo-avant-gardes often operated on the fringes or beyond the official art infrastructures, and "nature" therefore formed an additional place for the production of art. Besides artistic plein-air and the official cultural policy of the state which aimed at the decentralization of the neo-avant-gardes in Poland, we can mention private, individual "underground" initiatives in post-1968 Czechoslovakia, or art as alternative way of life in Yugoslavia. Consequently, the artists who worked near or by the water were often interested not only in land art discourse, but also in realizing their performative and actionist scenarios that were developed on site with water.

It's important to note that, in introducing the term "hydro-art", I am not suggesting that neo-avant-garde artists in East-Central Europe reacted more to or had more to do with water than artists in other places. Rather, with this term I propose a decolonial intervention in the art history of East-Central Europe: it is a speculative proposal to read a stream of works associated with environmental art outside of the concepts developed in the discourse of "land art".

A historical mainstream of environmental art relates to the genre "land art". We can refer to the exact time this term was first used to group several artists under its umbrella. Gerry Schum (1938–1973) used the title "land art" for broadcasting on TV, on the 15th of April 1969. "The photograph becomes the actual object of art," wrote Schum in his introduction to the *Television Exhibition: Land Art*. First proposed by him, a land art canon has since been constituted by the names of (today) classic male artists such as Robert Smithson (1938–1973), Mike Heizer or Walter De Maria. Most of these artists used *land* as a resource in their ostentatious art projects and used art to alter the landscape. The concept of the social purpose of environmental art, as for instance explored in later works of Patricia Johanson (*Fair Park Lagoon*, 1981), was not yet articulated by Schum's TV exhibition. However, as Maja Fowkes's analysis demonstrated, this aspect was frequently examined by parallel East-Central European neo-avant-garde environmental art projects that engaged with the ecological predicament. Fowkes argued that, unlike in Western poststructuralist theory, in East-Central Europe environmental thinking was strongly related to utopian thinking: "There was

⁵⁶ For more about the art history of East-Central Europe and the possibility of an East-Central Europe perspective in art history see K. Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum's Artistic Practice: An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2021, pp. 11–23.

still some sense of the relicts of nature”,⁵⁷ or, as Haraway would put it, “ruins” in which one had to come to live together *with* human and non-human others.

Projects that were implemented in natural settings by the Slovenian OHO Group, for example, were not invasive, but existed alongside natural surroundings and were deeply engaged with the notions of ecology and human well-being. Artists didn’t use art to interfere with nature but, instead, as a tool to comment on the actual anthropogenic alternations in the natural landscape, focusing often on the issue of water. In this context, there is a particularly interesting group of performative works of Czech neo-avant-garde “water artists” such as Karel Miler (*Unveiling the River*, 1975), Milan Kozelka (*Suspension, Contacts* from 1979), or the slightly later actions of Milan Maur. Referring to these works, Pavlína Morganová has observed that water “became for Maur a constant source of various records, including tracing the changing shape of the riverbank, the water level and recording melting ice”.⁵⁸ These works included ephemeral, almost unnoticeable artistic gestures made in connection with land and water, and were rendered in the form of photographic documentation.

The awareness of a landscape let the artists work towards articulating and experiencing what Haraway calls “respons-ability” for the formal changes already made into the environment, rather than introducing new changes. “In passion and action,” Haraway writes about the ecological practice of cultivating respons-ability, “in detachment and attachment, that is also a collective knowing and doing”.⁵⁹ Thus, on another level, the art project realized with water attempted to redefine human and non-human relationships in terms of planetary interdependence and recognize “agency across the human/non-human divide”.⁶⁰ Therefore hydro-art involved an understanding of the material world that comes close to that articulated in contemporary hydro-criticism and which does not only point to “the connections between water, its management and political projects of modernity”,⁶¹ but also favour post-humanist ontologies and a view of the world as being in flux.

Finally, I would like to touch on one more aspect of neo-avant-garde hydro-art. I propose that hydro-art enables us to participate more actively in the global “oceanic discourse”. On this view, hydro-art is not merely an object that can be analysed according to the theoretical frameworks developed within the context of blue humanities, but also offers conceptual and visual tools that can connect with the conversation from a specific local and regional perspective. In Dobkowski’s words, it can “fertilize” and “populate” blue humanities with new figures and watery figurations. The works analysed or mentioned in the paper introduce a range of models of art/water

⁵⁷ M. Fowkes, *The Green Bloc...*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁵⁸ P. Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Karolinum Press, Prague 2014, p. 147.

⁵⁹ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble...*, op. cit., p. 34.

⁶⁰ T. Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2020, p. 153.

⁶¹ L. Winkiel, *Introduction...*, op. cit., p. 2.

entanglements that can become the source of localized hydro-critical language. Such language can not only address the translocal, global ecological and political problems and other issues that have already been discussed in blue humanities, but may perhaps also be able to help us to formulate new site-specific questions.

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