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Critical Landscape of Polish Photography – Geographies of Peripheries

In the article I pose two basic questions. One reads as follows: What is the place of contemporary landscape photography in the perspective of activities that reflect on the problems of changes in the natural environment? The other one is: What cultural significations are presented by the authors focusing their attention on the peripheries (in the understanding of non-central places, neglected in social and economic discourse)?

The aim of the three projects analysed in the text is to tell the story of specific places transformed and inhabited by people. The authors I have chosen (Waldemar Śliwczyński, Maciej Rawluk and Michał Woroniak) use the convention of photography of the road to talk about peripheries, or places abandoned from the perspective of the changing economy and therefore forgotten. Their photographs provide evidence of environmental changes and their impact on the social world. The article is divided into two parts: in the first part, the Polish context of the new topographics is outlined in relation to the issues of landscape research, whereas in the second part I present the works of three selected photographers.

1. New topographics and cultural landscape studies

1.1 New topographics in Poland

It is most widely recognised that the term “new topographics” grew in popularity thanks to curator William Jenkins and his 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* in The George Eastman House in Rochester. Equally significant here were two earlier shows, *Toward a Social Landscape* (Nathan Lyons, 1966) and *New Documents* (John Szarkowski, MoMA 1967).

The new topographics photography merges a growing ecological awareness and promotion of conceptual thinking in art, encouraging the limitation of artistic expression to bare necessities. The resultant photo-

graphs exhibit features of a documentary, masterly conceal their constructed nature and “look like” reality.

In Poland, inspirations by new topographics emerged late yet at once gained a sizeable group of followers, especially among artists born after 1970. This imagery can be found in works by e.g. Nicolas Groszpiere, Konrad Pustoła, Wojtek Wilczyk, Rafał Milach. Its popularity was due to two processes: 1) one occurring within photography as art and 2) one resulting from the political and economic situation in Poland in the 1990s. The former was expressed in a rebellion against the tradition of artistic landscapes, directed against elementary and intermedia photography. The latter was reflected by the need to observe the social transformation. Thus, it is a replacement of the unique with the mundane and sophistication with the vernacular. Polish photographers, inspired by the style of American images, spin their own stories about the local context: economic collapse, social disappointments and the remains of the old system.

1.2. Cultural landscape studies in the Anthropocene era

Cultural landscape studies vs. the human subject comprise reflection from classical philosophical aesthetics (British empiricists, Goethe, the Lake Poets: W. Wordsworth and W. Coleridge, J. Ruskin), sociology (G. Simmel, T. Ingold, T. Edensor, J. Urry, P. Macnaghten), image anthropology (H. Belting), environmental aesthetics (A. Berleant) through to contemporary ethnographic and sociological visual research (S. Pink, L. Pauwels, M. Klett) and the subjects of Anthropocene and capitalocene (T.J. Demos, N. Klein). Polish relevant literature is quite extensive (H. Buczyńska-Garwicz, B. Frydryczak, K. Wilkoszewska).

2. Peripheries in the new topographics

2.1. *808.2 km* by Waldemar Śliwczyński (2015)

808.2 km is a record of a journey from the sources of the River Warta in Kromolów to its estuary near Kostrzyn. Śliwczyński observes the life of the river from its banks rather than from the perspective of the current. The photographs are filled with chance presence of people. The album is composed of two- or three-picture panoramas, which impacts the perception of the photographs and offers the viewer an impression of a smooth and continuous journey. Śliwczyński enriches the “new topographics” style with a gaze that characterises Robert Frank’s “photography of the road”. Therefore, the description of the work on the project and the “familial” image of the photographer recorded unofficially by the participants of the expedition, became an integral part of the project.

2.2. *Route One* by Maciej Rawluk (2014)

The motif of a journey is the subject matter of *Route One* by Maciej Rawluk (2014). This is the number of the former main road running from the north to the south of Poland. When highway A1 was built, the number of the road changed to 91. At the same time, the importance of the road and thus the benefits that the local residents may have had from this route dropped. Rawluk's photos are a hybrid project in the context of topographic photography as a representation of space. His photographs that show areas and buildings along the road are interspersed with documentary portraits of people living by the road and living off it. It is therefore a deliberately simple and modest photograph, referring strictly to peripheral representation, i.e. expressive of a deliberate avoidance of the spectacular.

2.3. Michał Woroniak, *Bounty Harvest*, 2017

The photographs of Michał Woroniak were taken in three towns in southern Wielkopolska. Krobia, Poniec and Miejska Górką, as the author wrote in his statement accompanying the work, were a traditional "granary of Poland" and were synonymous with fertile land. The eponymous "bountiful harvest" has a double meaning here: it refers both to crops and natural resources, i.e. lignite deposits. Under the idyllic image of an agricultural paradise there is a layer of mining exploration. The spaces photographed by Woroniak, both the visible and the invisible or underground ones, relate to the exploitation and transformation of the natural environment: the former to the way of industrial agriculture, the latter to mining. The change in the landscape will occur regardless of whether or not the drilling will take place. This will affect people's living conditions, forcing them to change their livelihoods.

Conclusion: critical landscape as an image of the peripheries

The term "critical landscape" I have proposed would have several distinct characteristics:

- 1) methodologically, it belongs to terms inspired by theoretical concepts that encourage critical reflection on art history, such as "studies of the artistic periphery of the world";
- 2) it is inspired by "critical geography", exposing the dependence of geographical knowledge on political power and capitalist production;
- 3) it fits into contemporary environmental discussions starting from the economic, political, biological concepts of Anthropocene and capita-

locene, but instead of showing them in a universal, global perspective, it focuses on the specifically local and tracks the consequences of changes in the landscape;

- 4) the analysis material covers areas marginalized in both visual and global economic history.

The critical landscape therefore deals with marginalised areas, peripheries. Their topography is largely invisible and overlooked in public discourse. Photography reveals it, laying the foundations for a new kind of landscape imagination, which is nowadays becoming indispensable for the survival of the human species on Earth. What is at stake here is not only seeing landscape but linking environmental thinking with the awareness of the consequences of human activity. ●