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To See a Dispersed City: Art vs. Exurbanization

The article focuses on artistic transpositions and interpretations of the processes of exurbanization and their consequences in individual and social life. The phenomenon of exurbanization, or the excessive growth of urbanized areas, is the fruit of the industrial era and the attendant rapid development of means of transport: rail and car, as well as transportation infrastructure. In the current post-industrial world, the pace of urbanization processes is growing steadily, while their negative effects are being felt by more and more inhabitants of the world. As a result of the progressing exurbanization, stretches of open rural areas, often valuable in terms of nature, are gradually being seized. Areas affected by the exurbanization are dominated by homogeneous and monotonous single-family buildings, often with no shared spaces and facilities such as service and commercial infrastructure, schools or health centres. The inhabitants of such places need a car to commute to work and to satisfy many of their living needs. Specialists investigating exurbanization enumerate a number of its undesirable economic, social and environmental consequences.

Exurbanization is a topic that is increasingly being discussed in the media and in various forums. This issue is also present in artistic creation and this is what this text is devoted to. It refers to examples of artistic forms of expression, differing in terms of the means used and the perspective on the problem. These works, although they provoke reflection on the extent of human interference in spatial natural resources and its consequences (functional, ethical, aesthetic), are, however, devoid of the biased rhetoric of media discourse that accompanies the issue of “urban sprawl”.

One of such works is *Arena* by the Irish artist Páraic McGloughlin. This short film, a compilation of images generated in Google Earth, shows the scale of human impact of the globe. The images of the Earth maimed by progressing urbanization, appropriately compiled and synchronized with pulsating music, shock with their mechanical consequence. At the same time, they strengthen our conviction that we are dealing with some unique beauty which may give rise to a sense of guilt and provoke difficult questions, such as whether the aesthetic quality of human interference

in the matter of the world can be an excuse for this guilty feeling? The development of digital mapping technologies and the mass availability of tools to view ever more accurate maps of the globe are conducive to the spread of public awareness of the extent of exurbanization and human interference into available natural resources. On the other hand, a look from the perspective of a satellite, mediated by a computer screen, although it enables a better grasp of the scale of the phenomenon, paradoxically distances the observer from the problem, situating him or her outside it and weakening his or her criticism. However, the art referring implicitly to the problem of exurbanization most often uses the lens of a “broad angle” from a distance. It uses various tools of analogue or digital cartography as well as the aesthetics of plans and models used in urban planning. The most interesting projects skilfully adapt the “raw” scientific instruments to create an intriguing message. These are precisely the sculptural installations by Norwood Viviano, artistic transpositions of statistical data and cartographic models. Kathryn Clark uses a similar procedure in her unusual patchwork bedspreads, which illustrate the scale of takeovers of property as a result of debts of their owners. Dylan Beck, on the other hand, articulates the drama of exurbanization through actions directly involving the audience: in one of his performances, the artist unpacked the ceramic modules in front of the audience and arranged them in a compact, fast-growing configuration resembling the growing suburbs. In about half an hour, the gallery space filled up completely and the members of the audience, pushed against the walls, were finally forced to leave the room.

The article also mentions works marked by a sensitive view of the aftermath of the phenomenon that shapes and defines the living space of millions of ordinary people. These are, for example, Shawn Demarest’s paintings, which show sections of suburbia captured at different times of day and year. Deprived of human figures, seemingly banal scenes, suggest the presence and gaze of a sensitive observer and contain a considerable nostalgic charge. A look at the exurbanization from the “bottom-up” perspective of a suburban resident can be refreshing. Experts and publicists stigmatizing the phenomenon of urban sprawl sometimes seem to forget that many residents are condemned to live in what the former call a “dehumanized space” or even “urban pathology” and that this “pathology” is their everyday life, their home.

Both the nostalgic view of the suburbia and the more critical works directly evoking urban sprawl and stigmatizing its effects involve an encouragement to consider a fuller spectrum of exurbanization issues, at the same time strengthening the need for a relational approach to natural and urbanized space. Certainly, this need has contributed to the emergence of relatively new interdisciplinary fields, which have evolved from traditional

scientific disciplines (such as the fields developing mainly in the last two decades: relational geography, relational ecology and relational theory of spatial planning). In this context, the works referred to in the article are heuristically topical in that they provoke the launch of alternative methods of looking and understanding, help to “see” (and thus understand) the world, in line with Nicholas Mirzoeff’s conviction: “if we are to create new ways of depicting our place and role in the world, we need a new visual way of thinking, adapted to the Anthropocene”¹. ●

» 1 N. Mirzoeff, *Jak zobaczyć świat [How To See the World]*, after the Polish translation by Łukasz Zaremba, *Karakter, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, Kraków-Warszawa*, p. 252.