

Between Image and Object: Looking for a Visual Language for the Environment

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ABSTRACT

The aim of my study is to discuss the artistic language as a tool for narrating the environment. I consider whether modified art-based research (ABR) methods can be effective in relation to scientific data and the dissemination of knowledge about environmental changes. The main research question posed in the text is: How the effects of human actions, contributing to the extermination of the natural world, can be conveyed by visual means? In respect to two art exhibitions: “Endling” by Diana Lelonek and “Plantae Malum” by Anna Kędziora, I argue that the artistic methods can be used for disseminating knowledge about current environmental changes and their consequences for the future of the planet Earth. The main effects of my research prove that the combination of authority of photography and object-oriented character of the artwork are effective in telling the story of environmental changes and can increase recipients' awareness of their occurrence. By showing natural objects, they address the relationship between humans and the natural environment, laying bare the mechanisms of exclusion and extermination.

Keywords: photography, visual culture of environmentalism, Art-based research.

1 Introduction

In the context of the Anthropocene, dark ecology and object-oriented ontology, the topic of plants and animals has been garnering ever-greater attention from contemporary artists. Forming the backbone for artistic practices of this type are intellectual trends influenced by such research sub-disciplines as ecocultural studies, ecocriticism, as well as ecological culture inspired by visual studies. In the first trend, attention is paid to relations, connections and mediations leading to thinking in terms of culture–nature (Rewers, 2017); in the second, the main topic of interest is the location of “nature,” or the environment in its historically and politically understood cultural contexts (Clark, 2011; Buell, 1995). The third approach exposes the multiple connections between natural and cultural phenomena. The concepts of “natureculture” and “intra-action” are both invoked (Haraway, 2003; Demos, 2019; Barad, 2007). These authors focus on forms of materiality and “more-than-human” forms of life and propose an in-depth analysis of political, economic and social relations and understanding the relationship between human activity and its impact on the environment (Demos, 2019). Deborah J. Heynes (2015) argues that this type of analysis should also be manifested in the visual arts. I, in turn, argue herein that adapting contemporary visual arts to the needs of ecological discourse nevertheless requires a certain rethinking of art-based research (“ABR”) methods, redirecting their interest from understanding social relations (Leavy, 2015; Barone & Eisner, 2019) to research on the Anthropocene and the effects of human activity on animate and inanimate non-human agents (Merchant, 2020).

The aim of the present study is to address a very specific question: How can and should photography and other artistic means be used to disseminate knowledge about environmental changes – not only to inform viewers about the effects (knowledge that is more or less already being conveyed by popular media), but



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also to create a space of self-reflection on their causes and interconnections? At issue, therefore, is the treatment of visual works as tools in the environmental discourse. Ecocultural studies provide a philosophical background for understanding natureculture (or culture–nature) dependencies, while ecocriticism (Tabaszewska, 2018), understood as “searching for a language” of narration, can be an inspiration for reflection on visual arts. The exhibition projects of Anna Kędziora and Diana Lelonek, based on photography, are, in my opinion, an excellent field of reflection on the contemporary sense of the natural-cultural entanglement: 1) by creating a space of experience, and 2) by confronting the photographic image with the material object presented at the exhibition.

2 Art-based research in the context of ecological visual studies

ABR methods, which were popularized by Patricia Leavy’s well-known book *Methods Meet Arts* (2015), apply to a wide range of genres: narrative inquiry, fiction-based research, poetry, music, dance, theatre, film, and visual art. Most of them need participation and activism and focus on the human social world. However, when we talk about gallery shows, this kind of interaction is usually impossible. The artworks exist as finished aesthetic objects. This does not mean that a piece of art cannot be a trigger for viewers’ experience. Visual arts engage the audience’s imaginations and can activate the community, referring to the participant’s intimate feelings and memories (both good and bad), their fears and hopes. Marta Kosińska identifies three tendencies in applying ABR methods (Kosińska, 2016). The first one emphasizes the cognitive status of science and art equally, and highlights art’s ability to help us understand the world in depth. In the second, “heuristic” approach, art has an experimental and hermeneutic dimension. This means that it leads to cognition through experiment, on the one hand, and develops the skills of critical interpretation, on the other. The third tendency emphasizes activism and creativity at the same time. Co-involvement thus means here an imaginative interpretation and looking for scientific sources for further enquiries. The third aspect described by Kosińska is also referred to by Tom Barone Jr. and Elliot W. Eisner (2012), emphasizing that the role of ABR is to understand the processes in which one participates and to deepen the sphere of knowledge by artistic means. This assumption is crucial for artworks that refer to environmental discourse. Art practice draws the audience’s attention to contemporary problems and puts them in a more understandable language of experience. Viewers do not have to analyze the scientific discourse to experience it. Therefore, it is the idea of involvement in the work that is fundamental here.

Engagement (or even immersion) in the problems presented in art objects is one of the main assumptions of the approach of visual culture of ecology. T.J. Demos (2016) proposes moving away from the visual language of representations showing natural forms (such as landscapes or biological exhibits) in favor of experimental artistic practices, proposing various types of involvement in the environment. It seems that in this sense the examples I have chosen as case studies are not very immersive. However, as I will try to show, this is where their strength lies. Therefore, in the visual perspective of the culture of ecology, multiple connections between natural and cultural phenomena come to the fore. The basis is the tension between the exhibit and its image. The concepts of “natureculture” and “intra-action” posited by Karen Barad (2007), which reject the original separateness of the original categories, may be useful here. The importance of environmental materialities and “more-than-human” life forms that are subject to various forms of oppression, but which should not be studied “by focusing solely on the non-human environmental sphere or, conversely, on social justice” (Demos, 2019, p. 2) are significant. Equally vital for my study is the fact that both of the works in question were created by female artists. Although it would seem that there is no direct reference to feminism in their works, both of them undoubtedly draw inspiration from the perspective of feminist criticism, focused on material, existential and plant discourse – Carolyn Merchant (2020), for example, interprets a concept of Feminist Care into Earthcare.

3 Case studies

The above concepts form the background for the case studies to be analyzed here. Patricia Leavy's notions apply mainly to social perspectives, studies on the past, and identity, while the proposals of Tom Barone Jr. and Elliot W. Eisner expose the role of artistic practice in understanding social relations. They are reworked in the context of discourse of visual ecological culture that focus both on creativity and knowledge. As I will seek to show, the works of Anna Kędziora and Diana Lelonek use exhibition means that engage viewers to reflect on the heritage of the Anthropocene and the role of humans in shaping the environment of plants and animals. Before proceeding to this analysis, however, three remarks are in order. First of all, both artists work on the borderline of art and science; they cooperate with scientists and conduct thorough research on the problem they are interested in before implementing it into artworks. They are also associated with educational institutions: Kędziora as a graduate and lecturer at the University of Arts in Poznań, whereas Lelonek as a graduate of doctoral studies at the University of Arts, currently associated with the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Secondly, the analyzed exhibitions were displayed at the "pf" gallery in Poznań, located in the historic edifice of the Imperial Castle. The location and interior decoration of the building (half-columns, granite floor and a characteristic neo-Roman ceiling) determine the space and also imposes an exhibition frame. The architecture affects both the structure of the exhibitions, but also the experience of its reception, recalling the context of history, the past, or even connote a kind of mausoleum. And thirdly, I propose a frame of analysis that divides the material into what we see/hear in the gallery and what the artists are trying to address. Obviously, due to the brief character of the text only few chosen aspects of analyzed artworks will be presented.

3.1 Anna Kędziora, *Plantae Malum*, 2022

The title of Anna Kędziora's work is *Plantae Malum*. What are these "bad plants" and why are they bad? Before I get to the answer to this question, let's first take a look at the exhibition. The presentation opens with a surface covered with drawings depicting plant structures: roots, stems and flowers. We pass a wall and enter a dark corridor, in which there is an illuminated display case presenting wax cast of plants (**Figure 1**). Then we move on to the main part of the gallery. Here photographic representations of plants are hung on the walls.



Figure 1: Anna Kędziora, *Plantae Malum*, 2021, "pf" Gallery in Poznań, courtesy of the artist



Figure 2: Anna Kedziora, *Plantae Malum*, 2021, courtesy of the artist

Shown against a dazzling white background, the plants seem frail and delicate. The green of the stems harmonizes with the fragile purple of the flowers (**Figure 2**). They seem to be alienated in a cold photographic studio. They were plucked, the inflorescences cut off, doomed to die. Photographic studies of plants juxtaposed against their three-dimensional, embodied wax casts allow us to perceive them as both alive (preserved for eternity in a wax cast) and dead (cut off) at the same time. One may ask why the exhibition does not use the traditional herbarium method, placing the floral specimens into a notebook? As **table 1** shows, the use of artistic means closely matches the four thematic threads of the work. The wax in which the object was embedded is of importance here. It is a natural material, produced by bees (but also stolen by humans). Wax is warm and carnal but expresses the paradox of the photographic image itself – alive and dead at the same time (Barthes, 1981). Combining photography and imprints, Kędziora draws attention to the plants we call “weeds” while at the same time placing them in a mausoleum.

Table 1: Comparison of the use of visual means to the thematic content of the work in Anna Kędziora’s *Plantae Malum*

What can be seen?	What is the story about?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing • Photographs of plants • Wax cast of plants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wax and photography • <i>Pharmakon</i>: herbs or “weeds”? • Herbology as a science • Exclusions – evictions

The meaning of the word “weed” is ambiguous in literature and philosophy. On the one hand, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.” (Rybicka, 2021, p. 57). On the other it can be compared to a “pharmakon” - a healing herb and a poison at the same time – as discussed by Jacques Derrida (1981). It is worth remembering that weeds have a science dedicated to them – herbology. This discipline of knowledge relevant to the cultivation of plants used by man, but being the science of weeds, is in fact concerned with the elimination of weeds. Weeds are described as a

threat to a the cultivation of plants useful for consumption. They also constitute the unwanted heritage of the Anthropocene. The herbologist Kazimierz Adamczewski writes:

“As plants came to be domesticated and cultivated, weeds also appeared in the fields. They accompany cultivated plants, posing a serious threat. Despite thousands of years of efforts to control weeds, they exhibit an extraordinary resistance to attempts to eliminate them from agricultural fields; they are characterized by incredible adaptability and continue to evolve.” (Adamczewski, 2014, p. 14)

This demonstrates the perspective of efficiency that is characteristic of agricultural science. In this context, weeds can be called “*plantae malum*,” because they threaten the crops. Moreover, if crops are thought to be “domesticated,” we can assume that weeds are seen as wild and alien – strong and unyielding plants that resist attempts to tame them. Cultural scholar Magdalena Zamorska thinks about plants differently, emphasizing that processes of migration and adaptation are analogous in the case of plant kingdom and social phenomena (Zamorska, 2021). One could say that weeds are unwanted, they are similarly relegated to the status of unwanted squatters and evicted. Aleksandra Brylska also encourages us to rethink the human–plant relationship, noting that the language of description of weeds is usually negatively marked and obscures the multifacetedness of “weed” (2020, p. 79). In her view, weeds can be a model for forms of resistance (including political resistance) occurring in the social world. Brylska refers here to the thoughts of Michael Marder, who wrote about the Occupy movement that adapts to unfavorable political circumstances. Participants of the movement adopt “weedlike” strategies, allowing them to take positions in an unfavorable environment (Marder 2012, p. 30).

In *Plantae Malum* Kędziora not only invokes verbal communication but also makes use of associations that trigger visual and experiential memory. The photographic part of the work is both an appreciation of the “weed,” making it the main actor of the spectacle she proposes, and also showing its aesthetic potential. In turn, the wax casts of plants used in the exhibition are a visual and material metaphor of both dying and survival. In a text devoted to *Wasteplants Album*, a work by Diana Lelonek, Anna Wandzel introduces the concept of a “post-herbarium.” Such a collection contains not herbs, flowers or roots, as in a traditional herbarium, but presents a whole range of Anthropocene wastes, including man-made objects that are exposed to biological agents. These new “garbage plants,” as Lelonek herself calls them (2022), are overgrown with lichens, plants and moss. Wandzel underlines that the work is embedded mainly in the context of science, not aesthetics (despite the aesthetic value of the photographs) and cannot be reduced to “artistic fantasy.” The scientific language of both botany and the arts is necessary to understand the meaning of the material biographies of plants (Wandzel, 2018, p. 280). *Plantae Malum* cannot be reduced to “artistic fantasy,” either. It refers to contemporary reflection on weeds and to the knowledge of the past social and cultural significance of these organisms that have been recognized as harmful. Now we start to see their positive role. It also encourages us to rethink the relationship between the photographic image and the object. John Berger and Jean Mohr wrote that in the photographic narrative the image itself is already a confirmation of what the words tell (Berger & Mohr, 1995). In Kędziora’s work, it turns out that photographic reality alone is no longer reliable. Therefore, we need the three-dimensional object as proof of existence.

3.2 Diana Lelonek, *Endling*, 2022

Absence and exhaustion are also discussed by Diana Lelonek in the *Endling* project. The show consists of two parts – the first encloses eight photographs (a series entitled *Birds*), the second is a sound installation (entitled *Endling*). Lelonek uses the spatial aspects of the gallery, its expressive Neo-Roman architecture, the rhythm of half-columns, the gloss of the granite floor, as well as the acoustics characteristic of historic

interiors (**Figure 3**). The corridor leads us deeper into the gallery, towards the object placed on the opposite wall of the exhibition.

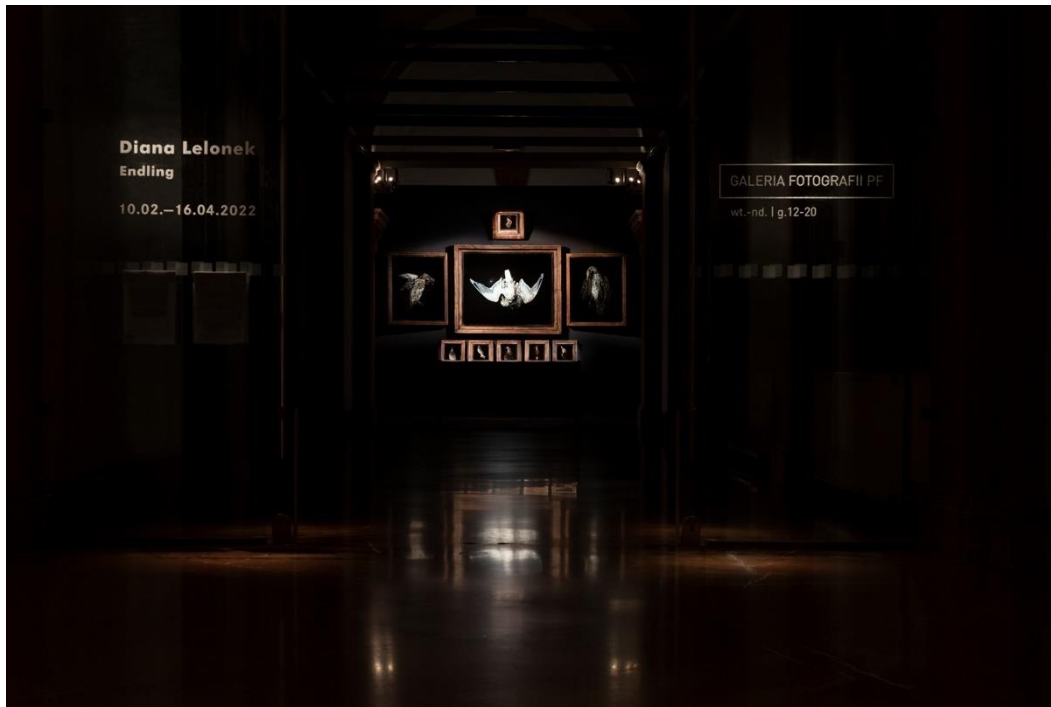


Figure 3: Diana Lelonek, *Endling*, 2022, “pf” Gallery in Poznań, phot. Anna Kędziora

The central place of the exhibition is occupied by a triptych, showing in color (but nearly monochrome) photographs, the corpses of three birds (an auk, cormorant and herring gull) found by the artist on the Baltic seashore. The one in the middle of the composition is presented with outspread wings, while on the side panels, birds are bending their heads towards the central figure of the object. Below (and above), the artist placed six smaller photographs of stuffed bird bodies (exhibits from the collection of the Natural Museum in Basel, including a passenger pigeon). Each photo is set in a heavy, wooden, hand-made frame. The arrangement of the photographs and the presentation of the bodies of the birds clearly evoke a form of altar. The effect is enhanced by spot lighting of the frames, extracting the images out of the darkness. The latter part of the exhibition, titled *Endling*, is a sound installation presenting the voices of 15 species of extinct birds recorded in the second half of the twentieth century, currently deposited in the archives of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Table 2: Comparison of the use of visual means to the thematic content of the work in Diana Lelonek’s “Endling”

What can be seen /heard?	What is the story about?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photographs of birds • Heavy frames • The sound of birds’ voices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxidermy and photography • Extinction-prone species • Reintroduction of species

Table 2 indicates the crucial relationship between the artistic means used and the content of the work. The term “endling” first appeared in a report published by the journal *Nature* in 1996 (Erickson & Webster, 1996). The scholars coined the term after seeking a word to describe the last representative of a species

(human or non-human), directing the question to linguists and dictionaries. Etymologically, the word “endling” refers to “extinction” and “end.” It also calls attention to lineage and pedigree. When an endling dies, the species is considered extinct. Since the publication in *Nature*, the term has been frequently used in humanistic, scientific and artistic discourse.

Lelonek, who until now has worked mainly with bacteria, memory spaces and “garbage plants,” reaches here towards the animal world, but the processes she addresses are processes common to the entire culture–nature relationship. They recall practices of collecting trophies, i.e., stuffing animals, which is a specifically human activity, motivated by the desire for possession and sometimes greed. Interestingly, taxidermy is nowadays a frequent point of interest for historians, cultural experts and artists. Historical reconstruction is more and more often abandoned in favor of situating taxidermy in the context of post-humanist concepts (Aloi, 2018). In turn, in the arts, taxidermy is used by various artists, to mention only the most famous: Berlinda De Bruyckere, Mark Wilson and Bryndís Snóbjörnsdóttir, Maurizio Cattelan, Katarzyna Kozyra. Equally often, taxidermic objects appear in photography. They are used by Nicolas Gropierre and Anna Mokrzycka in the work *Mausoleum* (2007) and *Disassembly* (2012) by Bownik. Taxidermy tends to be compared to wax museums (Wieczorkiewicz, 2000; Cembrzyńska, 2014). *Endling* refers to fading away and final exploitation. Although the human figure is not shown here, human action is present in the background as the cause of species extinction. Researchers report that in the last 500 years at least 80 species of mammals, 182 species of birds (including 4 since 2000), 33 species of reptiles, 34 species of amphibians, 63 species of insects, 32 species of mussels and 281 species of snails have gone extinct. Extinction also applies to plants. Recently 12 species of lower plants, 13 species of monocots and 133 species of dicots have disappeared (Ptaszyńska, 2019). The prognosis for the survival of the living organisms on Earth is pessimistic.

Lelonek creates a painful metaphor of suffering and exploitation in the material form of an altar for dying species. The point is not that it is still possible to reverse the course of history and repair what was destroyed in the Anthropocene. On the contrary, death is blunt and visible. Here, too, a human/non-human relationship is revealed. Why exhibit a dead body? In the context of the human body, it is a manifestation of martyrdom, while in the context of an animal, it is the educational or hunting-related presentation of body-objects. Lelonek turns that around. On the altar we see the sacred body of the last representative of a species. But can the living bird be recreated? After all, we read about the efforts of scientists to reintroduce extinct species (such as the Tasmanian Tiger – actually a wolfhound). Nonetheless, as Karen Barad points out in a conversation, this restoration is never identical. Recalling the example of the project to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone National Park, she comments that the idea is a romantic illusion, as the new, reintroduced animal (or plant) will never be identical to the one that was annihilated by human activity (Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2012, p. 21). Thus, the endling will be the last even if we try to bring it back, because it will essentially be a new species, with a “different material history.”

4 Discussion: How to talk via the arts about the environment?

In this study, I was interested, on the one hand, in how artists construct a visual narrative to make it interesting for the public, but also in how contemporary artistic practices can explore environmental change. In order to study these practices, one should firstly rethink each of the elements of the exhibition narrative (Bal, 2001), and secondly examine the cultural frame of reference of the artistic work. As the examples of the two art exhibitions examined in this study serve to show – “Endling” by Diana Lelonek (2022) and “Plantae Malum” by Anna Kędziora (2021) – a narrative can be constructed by means of an immersive artistic experience. Creators can allow viewers to “enter the exhibition” using almost theatrical means, that is, based on the architecture of the gallery, lights, sounds, and the rhythm of viewers’ walk through the

audiovisual spectacle. Meanings are expressed through the visual language of the exhibition. Lelonek does not use additional material reference objects, as Kędziora does when exhibiting wax casts of plants. The authority of photography is enough for her. Limiting the artistic means used to photographic representation also allowed her to construct a metaphor represented in the altar. Photography replaced the physical body of a dead animal but is almost equally touching. Photography distances and at the same time brings the viewer closer. Therefore, the artist uses this duality of photography, which at the same time both refers to an object and shows its image.

The construction of the artistic space allows for the redefinition of ABR methods. Art serves here to study real relationships, phenomena and, at the same time, the experience of the viewers themselves. It also creates a special kind of agreement between science and art, based not so much on a situation in which art illustrates scientific theses, but is a new way of studying reality. Artistic practice illuminates research on the effects of human actions on the environment and allows for a new understanding of human/non-human relationships. Thus, it not only offers insight into the state of current knowledge, but also turns science from an abstract set of numbers and graphs into an experience. In contemporary culture, environmental discourses on art, concern about the future of the Earth, and efforts to understand current environmental problems are placed in the foreground. When it comes to the visual pieces of Kędziora and Lelonek, I find the same care in their works. It is crucial for them to talk about the present state of nature, more specifically about the impact of human activity on the natural and human world. To achieve their goal, they cross the borders of aesthetics and genre assignments of art disciplines to establish a new reconfiguration of the art practice.

5 Conclusion

In closing, let us revisit the question posed at the opening: How can and should the arts be used to talk about environmental change? I would like to focus on three aspects of visual narratives devoted to the topic. Firstly, the authority of photography allows a certain quasi-scientific meaning of the artwork to be built. It is based on the reality of the image as well as the cultural stereotype that photography shows only what exists. Nevertheless, this belief in the truthfulness of a photographic image is not fully sufficient in the age of digital manipulations. This is why a materialistic and object-oriented way of thinking about photography is promoted. The photographs may be supplemented with specimens, but they are also photographs of specimens. And finally, this exploration of materiality, which strengthens the metonymic powers of the artwork, serves artists to create a metaphorical-symbolic discourse that affects the audience. And a last question: Is it a coincidence, therefore, that both exhibitions were created by women-artists? I do not think so. From both works there emerges a special concern for species extinction and an invitation to rethink the legacy of the Anthropocene – with a awareness that we cannot abandon this era to develop new ways of living in it. However, as Carolyn Merchant would state, is it possible to replace the Age of Anthropocene with an Age of Sustainability? Lelonek and Kędziora represent a kind of committed care for the Earth, but their images are more pessimistic and melancholic than we might expect. They observe rather than offering simple solutions.

6 Declarations

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6.2 Competing Interests

I declare that there exists no potential conflict of interest.

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