

Summary. Lithuanian Nature Arts and Aesthetics of Anthropocene

The monograph analyses Lithuanian nature arts and the development of the aesthetics of the Anthropocene. It explores how Lithuanian visual artists have started to talk about nature conservation and ecology since the second half of the 20th century, and how the challenges posed by the Anthropocene of the 21st century are being considered. The focus is on the aesthetics of the Anthropocene, which addresses various issues related to the relationship between art and nature, the transcendence of the distinction between nature and culture, and the problems of changing aesthetic categories and the means of artistic expression. The monograph draws on the theoretical conceptions of various scholars to reveal the specificity of the arts of nature, eco-arts and the anthropocenarts: philosophers Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Karen Barad, Heather Davis, Etienne Turpin, Philip Hüpkes, historians and literary scholars Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, Amitav Ghosh, Gabrielle Dürbeck, Eva Horn, Hannes Bergthaller, researchers of visual culture and art critics Paul Ardenne, Nicolas Mirzoeff and others.

In the late 1960s, nature conservation and ecology gradually began to be raised in documentary media in Lithuania – cinema chronicles “Soviet Lithuania”, documentary films or propaganda posters. Soviet ideology glorified the modernisation of industry and agriculture, the extensive development of the tourism and recreation industry, which was perceived as the overcoming of nature, and the unquestionable supremacy of man over nature. Nature is seen as a resource that must be protected, at least declaratively, in order not to run out. The most important “official” environmental

issues are industrial and anthropogenic pollution of areas of the biosphere, the mutilation and destruction of animals and plants, and “irresponsible” or even “criminal” human behaviour in nature. Documentary cinema at that time was a tool of political ideology: the propaganda function of the films forced the filmmakers to ideologically portray the reality of post-war Lithuania. The most ideologized documentaries of the 1970s and 1980s and the cinema chronicles “Soviet Lithuania” emphasised the difference between nature and man, portraying nature as a resource serving human needs in the construction of socialist industry and life. They praised the work of reclaimers who turn wetlands into useful agricultural areas, and the efforts of the builders of the huge industrial plants – energy, chemical and others – that destroy local ecosystems. Other documentary and cinema chronicles filmmakers have captured nature with an ethical and respectful approach: all the components of the ecosystem and the biosphere as the land, the water, the plant and the animal world. The visual language of metaphors in the films did not conform to the ideological pathos of the backstage narrative. The images of nature, unspoiled by human activity, are used to express a silent opposition to the Soviet ideology of glorifying industrialisation. The beauty of the seaside region, the Curonian Spit and the banks of the Nemunas, captured by director and cinematographer Tautrimas – authentic images of nature and people unspoiled by industry, technology, industrial farming and fisheries – opposed the obligatory narrative of the aggressive socialist construction and the conquest of “water energy”. Other documentaries address pressing environmental issues, such as irresponsible farming on collective and Soviet farms and in industrial enterprises, leading to the pollution of water bodies with chemicals and waste, poaching, and the illegal mutilation or destruction of forest and aquatic animals.

In the 1970s the genre of nature documentaries was formed in Lithuania with the entry of young filmmakers Abukevičius, Digimas, Putilovas, etc. Together with naturalists, filmmakers observed and sensitively recorded the beauty of Lithuanian nature, the life of animals, the harmonious

coexistence of man and nature, and the necessity of preserving life forms. Lithuanian nature documentaries are characterised by an artistic interpretation of reality, which reveals an authorial vision, refined visual form and patient observation. Nature itself speaks in the films – landscapes, wild birds and beasts. Lithuanian nature documentaries are close to earth arts, characterised by poetic depictions of the beauty of the natural world. It reflects the vitality of the old Lithuanian worldview, preserved in the traditional rural culture – an ethical and respectful attitude towards nature. Man is a part of nature, aware of his dependence on nature's powers and various forms of life. Such documentaries had various functions – documentary, ecological awareness and other educational functions.

Graphic designers also touch on environmental and ecological themes. The poster designers were able to experiment more freely with the means of plastic expression, innovations from Western art, and to use unexpected visual symbols, allegories, metaphors and juxtapositions. Artists focused on motifs from Lithuanian folk tales, artworks, photographs, collages, experimented with the visual possibilities of type and other means of artistic expression. Some posters appealed more to the leaders of industrial enterprises and collective farms, urging them not to pollute water and forests with industrial waste or to cut them down; others urged holidaymakers not to pollute water bodies, not to litter or leave waste in forests, to be careful with fire, not to cut down trees, inviting them to go travelling and relaxing in the nature of Lithuania, or simply talking about the human duty to protect and care for nature.

The themes of nature and culture, the difference between man and nature, and industrial and technological progress have also emerged in the art depicted, although they are not so obvious and declarative. 20th century painting maintains the respect for nature that characterises the traditional worldview, and landscapes opened metaphysical and existential depths. Although the creative intentions are aesthetic, at the end of the 1970s, in addition to the official Soviet ideology of glorifying industrialisation, the

landscapes painted by Kuras, Rožanskaitė or Švažas, whether of nature, the city or the industry, contain motifs of pollution and ecology. The themes of nature and man, nature and culture, and industrial and technological interventions that damage the natural environment, are all themes that indicate a move towards ecological art. Ecological aspects are expressed in the subtexts of the works and in the means of plastic language; for example, Švažas' works depict the repulsive industrial intervention of the Soviet era in an expressive artistic form, the de-aestheticized subtexts of Kuras' paintings reveal the opposition between technology and nature in the fields, while the pollution of the Earth as a source of life is depicted in Rožanskaitė's paintings.

The 1990s was a period of ecological self-consciousness and the emergence of ecological arts. In the late Soviet period, industrial pollution reached a catastrophic level. The real threat of nuclear energy (the Chernobyl disaster and construction of Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant) led to ecological actions and marches that emerged in parallel with the independence movement. There is public talk of poisoned water and air, soil erosion, gigantic construction projects, outdated technology in industry and treatment plants, poor training of ecological professionals and lack of funds for environmental projects. Documentary filmmakers are looking for new ways of cinematic language. The genre of the feature film is emerging, with direct statements in front of the camera, exaggerated interviews, conversations and discussions, and the use of eloquent and powerful visual metaphors, which allow us to speak openly about the consequences of the Soviet occupation – the destruction of Lithuania's nature, the destruction of its culture, and the enslavement of the nation. The rallies and spectacular actions organised in 1988 by the first Lithuanian Redemption Movement and the Lithuanian Green Organisations, during which bands of people "embraced" the Baltic Sea and put a ring of life around the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, united natural scientists, philosophers, writers and artists. The destruction of nature is

openly equated with the destruction of a nation, and ecological issues are intertwined with political intentions.

This is captured in Šilinis' film *Noah's Ark* (1988), where authors goes beyond the dichotomy between nature and culture, nature and man. Skvarnavičius' documentaries in the genre of *fieléton* documentaries represented specific cases of pollution of nature by industrial waste, which threatens the health and life of local communities, inefficient use of natural resources, and harsh criticism of company managers and officials. In his tragic short story "Life under the Maple Tree", Granauskas openly depicts the collectivisation and land reclamation that destroyed the lives of the rural population during the Soviet era. Film director Musnickas made a feature film based on it under the same title. The short story which deals with the transformation of nature due to anthropogenic factors – industrial agriculture – is one of the first modern Anthropocene narratives in Lithuanian literature and cinema: the narrative of nature's transformation forms a complete part of the social history. Alongside the usual language of art about nature conservation and ecology, new postmodern conceptual interdisciplinary modes of artistic expression are emerging, in which idea and process are the main means of "speaking". The "ecological turn" in Lithuanian art is inseparable from artistic actions and installations in open spaces with ecological intentions, which blurred the boundaries between art and life, art and nature, nature and culture, and actively expressed the ideas of nature conservation and ecology. The activities of the environmental art groups „Green Leaf“ and "Post Ars" have a clear ecological dimension. Thus, collective actions with political, ecological, social or artistic intentions are a sign of the times: in the work of film and interdisciplinary artists, nature transcends the boundaries of the film documentary or fine art genre. In environmental and land art, in indigenous art practices, actions and performances, nature becomes an active "partner" in artistic action.

As the "ecology boom" subsided in the mid-1990s, ecological thinking seemed to recede to the margins of artistic creation. However, the themes

of the relationship between nature and culture, nature and man, nature and technology are indirectly touched upon in the context of artistic explorations of various phenomena of the Soviet era, collective identities and memories, and the culture and mythology of old Lithuania. The main creative (audio)visual media used by the artists – film and video, photography, (video)installations – create the illusion of documentary, testimony and simulation of reality, “what really happened”. The artists explore local political, economic, social and cultural issues relevant to Lithuania, which they relate to the context of the Eastern and Central European region. In the first decade of the 21st century, the videos, installations and photographs indirectly touch upon nature and ecology as side sub-themes, explaining and deconstructing the legacy of the Soviet-era energy or military infrastructure, which, having become a tool of political power and manipulation, still affects the nature and people of Lithuania today. Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas, Narkevičius and others are working on these themes. They explore hyperobjects as large Soviet energy and military infrastructures that belong to an ecological discourse that combines the history of nature and man as a geological force.

Dendromorphic art installations and actions combine reality with mythology and raise the ideas of ecology and nature conservation. The nature photographs, installations and actions of Raila, Rožanskaitė and other artists are based on the old Lithuanian worldview and beliefs. The works blur the distinction between nature and culture, nature and man, and speak of man’s dependence on nature and the powers of the Earth (Raila’s “The Power of the Earth”). They show nature as a place of spiritual and physical refuge for man (Šerpytė’s “Forest Brothers”) and speak of the indivisible history of nature and people. In parallel, other ephemeral forms of nature art, which do not “fight” the challenges of the Anthropocene are also being developed in Lithuanian art.

The end of the second decade of the 21st century relates to the institutionalisation of the Anthropocene discourse in the Lithuanian field of art.

The “Anthropocenic turn” refers to the actualisation and reflection on the themes of the relationship between man and nature, the impact of humanity on the processes of life on the planet, climate change, the mass extinction of species, bioethics, ecological threats and disasters. Confronting new climatic and natural phenomena, whether in politics, philosophy, aesthetics or the arts, means first and foremost becoming aware of the power of human action and of the fact that human beings are no longer in control of the consequences of their own actions. The themes of the Anthropocene ecology and nature are raised not only in the work of individual artists – in local, solo exhibitions, but also function in the international art space as a symbolic goods representing Lithuania – there is an active exchange of artistic and creative ideas. Lithuanian artists participate in conceptual exhibitions organised by foreign curators (Emilija Škarnulytė, Pakui Hardware, etc.) or are invited to hold solo exhibitions and speak on the topics of global ecological transformations, global warming and climate change. Lithuanian art institutions export as symbolic goods artworks on the theme of the Anthropocene to represent Lithuania at international art events (Venice Architecture Biennale, Venice Contemporary Art Biennale). Lithuanian artists working abroad return to Lithuanian exhibition halls with their ideas on nature art. The experience of the capitalist post-industrial West and the rapidly developing or post-colonial countries of Asia or Latin America allows to re-read and re-evaluate the Soviet modernisation of industry and agriculture, with its large chemical plants and destruction of nature, as well as the first ecological movements in Lithuania.

The work of Lithuanian eco, nature and Anthropocene artists takes many forms and activities: creating in the natural environment (land art), documenting the crisis of ecosystems, contextualising the natural environment and the impact of human activity on it, exploring the relationship with other non-human beings – organisms, plants, the environment, and actively talking about the global ecological problems caused by climate change, technological progress, which are faced by humanity

and various communities around the world, and about the local issues of Lithuanian nature and ecology. Several key themes can be identified that relate to local Lithuanian issues and communities. Firstly, artists are interested in hyperobjects that are historically linked to the socio-political and economic context of Lithuania. These include the long-term effects of the legacy of Soviet-era energy technologies and infrastructure: the exploitation of oil fields and pipelines, the pollution of the environment with petroleum products such as plastic, nuclear power facilities embedded in the geological structure, nuclear power plants and weapons facilities and the long-term consequences of their use. Artists create “art of disasters” and scenarios of future, depict coexistence between different organisms, which allow them to imagine and experience a new planetary state. Such attempts can be seen in Škarnulytė’s performances, films and video installations, in artist duos Urbonas’ and “Pakui Hardware” artistic research and projects.

Another area of artistic research is more related to local issues and Lithuania’s natural environment and human activity. The artists deal with hydrological themes such as the draining of wetlands and dendrological themes such as the changes in the landscape caused by deforestation, the degradation of nature, agricultural technologies, and the effects of agricultural modernisation – collectivisation and land reclamation. The water sphere is one of the most important themes for nature artists. The Anthropocene imagining of water reflect on human attempts to control water (damming, irrigation, drainage) or on the uncontrolled response of water to these factors, such as storms or sea-level rise; not only the melting of glaciers under the influence of global warming, the pollution of seas, rivers or lakes (Škarnulytė’s video installations), but also the hybrid – intermediate spheres of nature – swamp ecosystems – transit, hardly defined and not easily “mastered” territories of marshes and lochs (Urbonai’s “Swamp School”, “A Partially Swamped Institution”), as well as the inhabitants of these territories (Maknytė’s “Partisan of Landscaping”).

The artistic researches of nature testify to an ontological shift. In the Anthropocene, nature can no longer be considered only as a human resource and object, i.e. while maintaining an epistemological distance, or be broken down into separate parts without losing the essential interconnectedness of its many active elements. The perception of intra-active vital coexistence – immanence – raises questions of entanglement. Artists talk about the relationship between humans and non-humans, raise questions of coexistence of species, the place of the animal in the food chain, illustrating that animals, micro-organisms, plants or minerals are not separate, but intertwined parts of a common biosphere. Everything that is inhuman and threatened by man himself is the subject of the artist's work in nature. Artists focus on the local world of hybrid micro-organisms (fungi, lichens, mosses, algae) and the animal world (beavers, cormorants or micro-organisms). The non-human gaze provides alternative horizons for seeing the world.

For artists depicting the contemporary natural and post-natural state of the planet, the question of representativeness arises: how and in what artistic form to show the planet's global "catastrophes without event"? Traditional plastic language of painting, sculpture or printmaking is limited in its ability to "downplay" the ecological catastrophes of the Anthropocene and apocalyptic end-of-the-world scenarios, such as chemical hyper-alertness or global climate change. The scenarios of imaginary global catastrophes caused by climate change are cinematic and photogenic, i.e. documentary simulacra of reality, in which we see a "full-fledged" – not artificial and not artistic – non-art-fiction – emotionally affecting, horrifying imaginary future state. The artistic aesthetics and language of the Anthropocene are thus documentary. Photographs and large-scale video installations, which zoom in, magnify and highlight the deformations of nature, allow the viewer to at least partially visually experience global change. Anthropocene artistic landscapes record heterotopia spaces that have been polluted, poisoned, destroyed, forgotten, abandoned, redeveloped or otherwise altered by hu-

man activity, as a contrast to the former images of nature's sublime beauty. Contemporary photography, video art or large-scale video installations depicting changes in nature can make the viewer at least partially aware of global climate change and the strange and unpredictable state of the world. Anthropocene artists all over the world are searching for extreme natural phenomena, places irreversibly transformed by anthropogenic and technogenic activities, creating post-gamut landscapes and embarking on extreme activities themselves (e.g. the risky performances of Škarnulytė or Pokukord).

Anthropocene aesthetics raises questions of the representability of different scales, the intersection of scale and size. Artists reflect on different temporal scales, such as the short-term human life, the long-term history of the Earth – geological deep time, or the future time, through mythology, legends, old stories, whose protagonists are inhuman – posthuman beings, who are located in the future places of technological ruins dramatically transformed by catastrophes without event. The different scales of places and spaces (local life forms vs. planetary-scale changes in the life system) and the forces at work (e.g. the actions of individuals multiplied a billion times and transformed into a major force changing the Earth and the climate) are represented by the possibilities of digital (audio)visual media. The hybrid medium of video and sound allows artists to deal with the challenges of documenting the Anthropocene, of latency, of entanglement and of representability of scale. In order to immerse the viewer in the atmosphere of the future and to make an emotional impact, the artists also pay attention to the scale of the video or other installations, the size of the depicted objects, using bird's-eye views from film or photography, macro images – small objects enlarged in magnification (such as lichen or moss by Ambrazevičiūtė), or large objects zoomed in on (Škarnulytė's technological devices) that become technological ornaments.

The natural arts of the Anthropocene are characterised by their scientific and interdisciplinarity. Artists, together with scientists, narrate and

depict in various forms how the disasters caused by global warming spread globally. In the nature-oriented Lithuanian art of the 2020s, the various components of nature become a source of artistic creativity. Contemporary biotechnological artistic experiments, born at the intersection of art and natural sciences, mark an “ontological turn” in the arts. Interdisciplinarity allows not only to discover new methods and possibilities of artistic creation, but also to change the anthropocentric gaze, to create a different relationship with non-human beings, to discover a new way of imagining life and to develop forms of co-creative existence.

The result of the Anthropocene natural artistic experiments is a scientific laboratory, pavilion, school or science museum for the study of fungi, algae, lichens, trees and other natural organisms, in the form of an installation-artwork in which art becomes nature. It refers to changes in the Earth’s geological layers, ecosystems or other natural environments using natural materials – clay, soil, rocks, pigments of various origins, and various symbiotic and hybrid micro-organisms – as part of the local biosphere and landscape, which are linked to the history and mythology of the land. The “contextualised” parts of nature in the art exhibition halls speak of the whole of geological deep time, the history of the Earth, nature as an irreversibly rearranging, changing, fragile and vulnerable organism. Artists combine the natural sciences – forestry, geology, biology, botany, zoology – to explore materials and micro-organisms of natural origin as tools and objects of artistic creation, experimenting in architecture, art, textiles, etc.

Scholars of Anthropocene art emphasise that one of the most important aspects of contemporary nature art is its communal and political character. Artistic processes and creative projects involve communities in specific places facing ecological threats, and art becomes an “martial art” not only abstractly addressing the problems of technogenic and anthropogenic pollution, climate warming, glacial melting, and loss of biodiversity, but also working towards political solutions. Artists with ecological work can engage in today’s debates about climate change, government policies or

corporate and individual responsibility, but this aspect is not particularly strong in Lithuania, despite a few exceptions. On the contrary, the exaggeration, aestheticization and downplaying of extreme climatic events and imagined future catastrophes is dangerous because audiovisual media create distance: it is easier for the audience to ignore the causes, to concentrate on the unseen and less visible consequences. In the absence of a struggle motif and a political dimension, the arts of the remain an aesthetic visualisation of a future catastrophe, of the consequences of global warming.

The themes and issues of the Anthropocene and climate change pose new challenges to the humanities: philosophy of art, aesthetics, art history and the field of visual culture studies. The realisation that the human impact on the natural environment is far greater than that of a simple biological factor is forcing a rethinking of the artificial distinction between human and natural histories, and the study of contemporary nature and the art of the Anthropocene is also confronted with questions of interdisciplinarity. The interpretation of the new planetary aesthetics and local bio-art themes is not sufficient for the usual methods of exploring art and visual culture but requires a “collaboration” between the various humanities and the natural sciences, and a rethinking of the foundations of the writing of cultural art and history.