Interviews

Portraying the Land: Ewa & Jacek Doroszenko on fallacies of the visual

Polish artists Ewa and Jacek Doroszenko have been extruding example of digitally produced — and ubiquitously available — geolocational imagery, to point out its distortions and elisions; at the same time, they harness sound and the concept of soundscape ecologies to heal our relationship with the natural environment.

Interviewee Ewa & Jacek Doroszenko
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Retinal saturation, image overload, dall-e creation: we are, though various terms and cultural experiences, familiar with the notion that we operate in an extreme era of mass visual communication, and victims of its attendant social and political conditioning. Polish artists Ewa and Jacek Doroszenko have been extruding example of digitally produced — and ubiquitously available — geolocational imagery, to point out its distortions and elisions; at the same time, they harness sound and the concept of soundscape ecologies to heal our relationship with the natural environment.

KOOZ Maybe we can start with the title of the exhibition, “Impossible Horizon”. How do you approach the term horizon and how does this frame your approach to the landscape?

EWA DOROSZENKO The works presented at the exhibition at Foto Forum Bolzano refer to the thesis put forward by the Polish-American philosopher Alfred Korzybski: "The map is not the territory." Based on observations of the natural landscape — which nowadays is more often captured in photographs than directly experienced — through our audio-visual works we tried to question the trust we place in the digitally constructed images that we surround ourselves with every day. When digitally generated photographic images became more common than photographs created on traditional photosensitive materials, there was a significant change in how we perceived reality, including the perception of the natural landscape. Photographic images have achieved astonishing features, including becoming almost immaterial, because, in the virtual world, the physical connection between the image and the medium disappears — as was the case several dozen years ago in analogue photographic prints.

JACEK DOROSZENKO The problem, as Zygmunt Bauman noted and brilliantly described, was the overabundance of things, information and stimuli that would seemingly force us to adapt to this faster pace, with the effect that our perception of reality is necessarily superficial. The overabundance of visual stimuli in contemporary reality makes us less sensitive to our surroundings, including the natural landscape. The term “horizon” appears in the title of our exhibition, understood not only as the line of contact between the sky and the surface of the earth, but as the extent or limit of our perceptual possibilities in this age of information overload.

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Ewa Doroszenko and Jacek Doroszenko, Impossible Horizon, Foto Forum, 2023 – exhibition view, Photo: Samira Mosca, Foto Forum.

KOOZ You look at the history of the Western tradition of landscape painting to better understand the causes of the current environmental crisis. What do these works reveal?

ED We are both professionally trained visual artists, more specifically painters. Jacek graduated with a master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, and I completed my doctorate in fine arts at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Therefore, we are convinced that landscape painting reflects man's relationship with the natural world. It is truly amazing that nature, as an endless resource of forms, shapes, and colours, has been an important source of creative inspiration in painting and every other field of art for millennia. The landscape motif has evolved and matured slowly, in various ways over the centuries. In the early days, landscape was the background of a work of art. The landscape figure, meanwhile, was used to show depth in a portrait or battle scene. The first decades of the 16th century saw a fundamental breakthrough in landscape painting: the landscape motif ceased to be merely a background and gradually gained more autonomy. This in turn led to the reduction — or even the complete abandonment — of human figures, and the transformation of landscape motifs into an independent genre. These revolutionary changes occurred in several places simultaneously: in Flanders, Germany, and Italy.

The term “landscape” itself has also evolved; ancient theorists often preferred to refer to landscape descriptively or to list the elements that make it up. In modern times it has also been defined similarly: for a long time, the landscape — whether a painted representation or an actual view — was seen not as a whole, but as the sum of its parts: rocks, mountains, lakes, rivers, buildings.

JD At the beginning of the 18th century, the concept of "landscape", understood as a view observed by man, did not exist. At that time, the word "landscape" was closer to the geographical concept of "territory". In the 18th century in England, an increased interest in nature coincided with the fashion of establishing extensive landscaped parks around palaces. Views of country estates, palaces and castles surrounded by nature became attractive to the elite. There was a canon of landscape painting. To maintain uniform rules of correctness in landscape painting, a dedicated manual was developed, which prescribed, among other things, the proportions between the plane of the ground and the sky, the size of architecture, the arrangement of tree clusters, the principle of perspective, and colours. In the history of art, the 18th century went down as the era of wanderers wishing to explore the world and experience closeness to nature. The term "poetics of the mountains' was born, which emphasised the sublimity of nature and evoked a state of spiritual rapture.

Looking at just these few phenomena we have mentioned (which are only a small fragment in the entire history of painting), we can see that an anthropocentric model of perceiving nature dominated Western painting. The achievement of the full autonomy of landscape as a painting genre coincided with the birth of Impressionism, within which painters recorded subjective, ephemeral impressions arising from the contemplation of nature. Over time, issues of light, its variation, and the interrelationship of colours, were replaced by purely formal issues, opening the door to avant-garde art.

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KOOZ As opposed to oil paintings of the past, your work explores how digital images mediate the perception of the natural world. How do tools such as Google Street View, computer games, immersive travel guides and other digital interfaces help you examine changes in the perception of landscape?

ED Both the current "Impossible Horizon" exhibition at Foto Forum in Bolzano, and the recent exhibition "Overlooked Horizons", held at Pragovka Gallery in Prague, show works made in a variety of media. At their core is a common interest in imagery and contemporary photography, which increasingly mediates our contact with the natural environment. We both feel that reality is so much hidden behind the photographic images that flood us; it is increasingly difficult to experience nature in "real life". So often, we get to know reality not in a direct way, but through the digital prism of the latest technologies.

Referring to Jean Baudrillard’s theory, we might say that in "hyperreality" the image does not refer to its prototype, but rather multiplies in the digital world as an autonomous entity. It has a separate possibility of communication with the viewer and, in addition, an unlimited capacity for copying. Today, we may not be able to separate the simulacrum from the original. Contemporary culture is increasingly becoming a culture of digital information streams, in which the division between virtual and real is less and less valid. Living in such a culture forces us constantly to change our identities — we experience this by contributing to social media, making transactions, providing information about our geo-location, playing online games, and posting digitally edited photos of ourselves online. Informational reality enables us to get to know the world better, and it also changes the way we see, influences our cognitive processes, and modifies our ideas of what a natural landscape is. Increasingly, the perception of the landscape occurs using sight alone, in isolation from the other senses. It is perception in context, that is, seeing that is linked to certain assumptions about what we consider worthy of seeing.

JD A closer look at this process reveals that the real world often becomes less attractive than the possibilities offered by being in simulated, extended online realities. This turns into indifference to the direct sensory experiences that are part of mundane everyday life. Therefore, real interactions can become less appealing than those created digitally, where the body is separated from its surroundings yet connected to advanced technology. Redirecting our perception towards digital streams of information can damage our sense of identity; it separates us from natural experience, and embeds us in a highly attractive and rich online reality to which we are not evolutionarily adapted. As far as I have learned, the brain has an amazing capacity to process many diverse activities in parallel. However, our ability to focus has its limitations. We cannot focus on multiple things at the same time. Jumping between tasks, including switching between the physical and virtual realms, is less effective than concentrating on a single action. We do not yet know how the stream of information affects our behaviour, but it may turn out that digitisation affects us more deeply than we think.

1/3 Ewa Doroszenko and Jacek Doroszenko, Impossible Horizon, Foto Forum, 2023 – exhibition view, Photo: Samira Mosca, Foto Forum.

KOOZ Your artistic practice treats sound as a fully-fledged element in the field of visual art, emphasising the importance of "deep listening" in everyday life. At a time in which our cities are extremely stressed by high levels of noise pollution, How important is this idea of “soundscape ecologies”?

JD Our artistic practice is characterised by the conscious creation of projects and exhibitions in which the visible and audible spheres interact in various ways. In our projects, the images follow directly from the recorded sounds and are their visual representation. By employing such a chronology of action, we seek to draw attention to the need to restore the sense of hearing to its proper rank, in a culture dominated by the visual. We are committed to a holistic experience of reality, including the natural landscape, which is not possible without the acoustic factor. We intend to emphasise the value of active listening as a cognitive process, requiring special effort and involvement. In the process of experiencing the landscape, we focus our attention primarily on the acoustic environment — the layer of reality closest to us, but which is usually only treated as a background, a kind of supplement to what we can see.

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Samira Mosca, Foto Forum.

ED As residents of Warsaw who regularly experience urban "noise pollution", we are keen to popularise the term "soundscape ecology" — the science of acoustic relationships between living organisms, human and otherwise, and their environment. We perceive modern culture, social life, and our entire environment mainly visually, making hearing secondary and irrelevant to us. In how we hear and what we hear, we may find the key to understanding the modern human condition. Increasingly, we have the impression that most of us live our lives in an automated way and reject undertaking any cognitive activity. Living in large, noise-polluted cities means that we have become accustomed to unpleasant sounds and are becoming less and less aware of the stimuli reaching us from everywhere. Unfortunately, such an automated and unreflective lifestyle can lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction with daily activities. In today's cities, the human-friendly sounds of nature have been displaced by overwhelming noise, which is categorised as a major cause of diminishing quality of life. We are all aware that noise-saturated spaces, such as those of an industrial nature, depress property prices in such areas. But noise is not just a nuisance, it is a form of environmental pollution that poses a real health risk.

Referring to this healing function of the landscape, we are creating works that will subtly reveal the inextricable link between humans and the surrounding nature. In how we hear and what we hear, we may find the key to understanding the modern human condition.

KOOZ Specifically, through sounds you aim to transfer the positive impacts of landscape onto human experience and psychological well-being. How do you approach the auditory exploration of places,and what is the value in the therapeutic function of landscape?

ED Evolutionarily, we are adapted to be in close contact with nature, not with industrialised spaces that cause stress and constant stimulation. Contact with the natural landscape, including the soundscape layer, has a direct effect on our bodies, causing very positive changes in the brain, lowering blood pressure, and reducing muscle tension. In Finland, a walk in the forest is prescribed to sick people by doctors. In South Korea, therapeutic forests are being developed to relieve stress. A growing body of research confirms that nature provides an authentic rest for the stressed brain.

Contemporary scientists, drawing on the achievements of psychology and neurology, are beginning to quantify what we have all intuitively sensed for a long time and what once seemed like something mystical. The results of these studies - measurements of stress hormones, heart rhythms, brain waves, and protein markers - indicate that when we spend time in a natural landscape, profound changes take place in us. According to modern science, the incidence of many intractable diseases, including depression, anxiety, coronary heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and migraine, is lower in people living within a kilometre radius of some oasis of greenery. The natural landscape is also linked to lower mortality rates and fewer stress hormones circulating in the blood.

JD Referring to this healing function of the landscape, we are creating works — objects, videos, sound installations and musical pieces — that will subtly reveal the inextricable link between humans and the surrounding nature. Along these lines, we look at diverse natural landscapes based on the visual aspects of space, and the less noticeable aural sphere. The experience of a landscape is determined not only by its visual attributes but also by its less noticeable dimensions — the auditory and olfactory ones, which determine our perception. Omitting the acoustic factor impoverishes this perception. Focusing on the need to protect the silence of soundscapes, this becomes a key challenge we need to address today.

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KOOZ If, through the Western tradition of landscape painting, we can better understand the causes of the current environmental crisis, how do your works offer a more holistic relationship?

ED We are grounded in a certain culture, so beyond purely biological conditions, our actions are determined by the influence of the environment, including culture. The Western tradition of landscape painting, the evolution of the photographic medium and contemporary technologies determine the way we perceive the world around us. In Western landscape painting, the concept of natural landscape has often been defined according to the dominant worldview - as a detached element, outside the subject. Moreover, the concept of landscape in European languages has undergone many changes over the centuries, which may be one of many proofs that in the history of culture, for centuries, there has been a clear discrepancy between the view of observed life and its painted representation.

JD What's more, an interesting mechanism was at work here: it was the painterly depiction of views that shaped the perception of the real landscape, prompting people to look for picturesque places in the real world and to view them in frames like those in paintings. Even though modern artists and theoreticians referred to the direct observation of nature and the elements of the landscape, they extremely rarely understood it as an independent whole, treating it rather piecemeal as a source of individual motifs useful in their compositions. In our works, we try to reject this fragmentary way of seeing the landscape and question the division between the observer and the isolated natural environment. We strive to break established patterns of behaviour and negotiate new ways of relating to the landscape. Especially in video works, we give voice to the landscape, which becomes the main element - a kind of conductor setting the direction of our performative actions. This situation occurs, among others, in the video "It is hard to find a polyphonic body", which we are currently showing at Foto Forum in Bolzano.

We created the film as part of the Artist-in-Residence programme at Kunstnarhuset Messen Ålvik in Norway a few years ago. The construction of the film was based on using the natural landscape as a space for musical notation. The surroundings of the majestic fjords were adapted as the environment for a unique score of a piece performed at the same time by a set of virtual instruments. The rocky landscape determined the direction of movement of the figure delineating the various elements of the musical composition. Thus, the location of the figure in the landscape influenced the determination of the pitch of the individual tones of the composition, on a frequency-based scale

Bio

Ewa Doroszenko – polish intermedia artist, Doctor of Fine Arts, lives and works in Warsaw. Graduate of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, scholarship holder of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in 2019 and the City of Toruń in the field of culture in 2013 and 2011. Winner of many international competitions, including Preview - Fait Gallery Brno 2016, Debuts 2018 - doc! photo magazine, Debut 2018 - Lithuanian Photographers Association and finalist of NoorderlichtInternational Photo Festival 2021, Kranj Foto Fest 2021, International Festival of Photography FIF BH - Brazil 2020, Athens Digital Arts Festival 2020, GENERATE! Festival for Electronic Arts 2019, Der Greif and the World Photography Organization open call 2018, FILE Electronic Language International Festival Sao Paulo 2015, Fisheye Youth Art Biennale 2013, Grey House Foundation Competition in Krakow 2011. Participant in numerous artist residency programmes, including Re_Actcontemporary art laboratory in Portugal, Atelierhaus Salzamt Linz in Austria, The Island ResignifiedLefkada in Greece, Petrohradska Kolektiv Prague in the Czech Republic, Klaipeda Culture Communication Center in Lithuania, AAVC Hangar Barcelona in Spain, Kunstnarhuset Messen Ålvikin Norway. She has exhibited her works at the Wroclaw Contemporary Museum, Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń, Fait Gallery in Brno, Propaganda Gallery in Warsaw, Exgirlfriend Gallery in Berlin, Witold Lutosławski National Forum of Music in Wroclaw, Polish Institute in Düsseldorf, among others.

Jacek Doroszenko – polish audio-visual artist, graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. Scholarship holder of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage 2020, the City of Toruń in the field of culture in 2011 and resident at, among others, AAVC Hangar Barcelona in Spain, Kunstnarhuset Messen Ålvik in Norway, Atelierhaus Salzamt Linz in Austria, The Island ResignifiedLefkada in Greece, Petrohradska Kolektiv Prague in the Czech Republic, Klaipeda Culture Communication Center in Lithuania. He has participated in The Wrong New Digital Art Biennale in Rio de Janeiro, FILE Electronic Language International Festival in Sao Paulo, Transmission Arts Festival in Athens, ISEA International Symposium on Electronic Art in Vancouver, Athens Digital Arts Festival, Future Places Festival in Porto, European Media Art Festival in Osnabrück, R>>EJECT Radicals Festival in Rotterdam, CoCart Festival in Toruń, Open-Source Art Festival in Sopot, Mediations Biennale in Warsaw, among others. He has presented his works at Propaganda Gallery in Warsaw, Exgirlfriend Gallery in Berlin, Jedna Dva Tři Gallery in Prague, Starak Family Foundation in Warsaw, Wroclaw Contemporary Museum, Witold Lutosławski National Forum of Music in Wroclaw, Polish Institute in Düsseldorf, among others. The artist's visual works are reflected in the field of music and sound art. His musical compositions have been released in the form of albums of international reach, including Infinite Values, Time Released Sound in the USA; Wide Grey, EileanRecords in France; Soundreaming and Bodyfulness, Audiobulb Records in the UK.

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