

**FROM TECH REVOLUTION TO APOCALYPSE:
THE STRENGTH OF VISUAL METAPHOR
IN ECOLOGICAL ART ACTIVISM**

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Abstract. This article focuses on the analysis of artistic works created in different countries and reflecting the ideas of destruction brought on by the advancements of industrial civilization and technological revolution, as well as an ecological catastrophe that is the impending doom of humanity. The study concludes that artists from different countries, regardless of their cultural background, strive to express their ideas through the universal language that can be understood in every corner of the globe. The strength of visual metaphors helps get across the deep tragedy of global ecological art: imagery of suffering, dying, hopelessness and despair is meant to visualize the catastrophic scale and consequences of the unfolding ecological crisis. This study is expected to clarify significant theoretical issues related to the phenomenon of ecological art. The study expands the conceptual base for further research on the theory and history of ecological art.

Keywords: contemporary painting, ecological art, environmental art, ecological art activism, visual metaphor, tech revolution in art, apocalypse in art, ecoaesthetics

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1. Introduction

Cubists and futurists created a romantically industrial interpretation of modern industry, bridges, roads, cities and other industrial-style images in western art. In the paintings by Fernand Leger (1881–1955), steel structures, pipelines, trademarks, lampposts, iron towers, workers and other elements manifesting the industrial civilization are crystallized as bright colorful symbols, which demonstrates the psychology and the spiritual peculiarities of modern life and reveals the positive sides of the industrial civilization. Later, as industrial culture began influencing and destroying the natural environment, and as the concept of ecological aesthetics emerged, people started to mentally resurrect the images of pastoral landscapes that had been crowded out by skyscrapers. As a result, the ‘industrial civilization’ became a theme and an object of artistic expression that saw creators reconsider industrial development through distant and gloomy industrial imagery.

With the development of environmental thought and different activist movements in the 20th century, artists found themselves in conditions that dictated urgent need to change the usual formats, categories and methods, creative tasks and approaches to solving them. The main issue raised was the role of art in the global environmental crisis. New concepts such as ‘ecological art’ or ‘eco-art’, ‘ecological aesthetics’ and ‘environmental aesthetics’ have come to the fore.

It is necessary to consider that different cultures generate their own ideas about the relationship between human and environment, which shape distinctive ecological aesthetics. On the other hand, the phenomenon of ecological art is a global initiative, so the discussion of eco-art of different countries allows judging about the differences and similarities in ways of expressing certain environmental topics, revealing the most important trends in the development of global ecological art and aesthetics, regardless of the national factor. This article is aimed at analyzing representative artistic works from different countries and establishing the specific features of visual metaphors used to describe ecological catastrophes and destruction caused by the development of industrial civilization and technological revolution. This new knowledge is expected to contribute to the theory of modern fine art and clarify significant theoretical issues related to the phenomenon of ecological art.

2. Research methods

The study was carried out through iconological method in accordance with the three stages proposed by E. Panofsky: the explanation of the natural meaning of the image, the search and interpretation of the meaning of the artistic image, the establishment of the ‘inner meaning’ or content of the work within the framework of ecological fine art. This approach is to reveal the essence of the content of the works under discussion, to identify specifics of environmental issues representation in the visual arts of the 20th – first quarter of the 21st centuries. The combination of iconological and formal approaches makes it possible to analyze the works of

modern ecological art in terms of semantic content and formal solutions. When considering artistic approaches to understanding and displaying environmental issues in ecological art, I also use comparative typological methods.

3. Literature on ecological art

The problem of eco-art has recently begun to attract more interest among scholars. The first attempts to study the phenomenon, seeking to define interrelationships and intersections between art and ecology, can be seen in European and American science. One of the early ecocritical texts was the monograph *Ecological Aesthetics. In The Comedy of Survival: Study in Literary Ecology* where Meeker (1974) discussed the issues of ecological aesthetics. Articles published in the 70s-80s were aimed to highlight the phenomenon of environmental aesthetics (Carlson 1976), reveal its principles and content (Koh 1988), etc. In the 1990s, scientific interest in eco-art was growing, which was largely due to the sharp increase in artistic works devoted to the problem of environmental protection (as evidenced by Cembalest (1991). Scientific focus was mainly on the relationship between environmental aesthetics and art education (Kauppinen 1990), the development of art in the context of the ecological crisis (Luke 1992) and its relationship with ecology (O'Brien 1991), the concept of ecological aesthetics (Smith 1990) and aesthetic perception of nature (Godlovitch 1998), the phenomena of eco-art (Sanders 1992) and environmental aesthetics (Godlovitch 1998, Foster 1998). Several studies address creative initiatives of particular eco-friendly artists (Matless and Revill 1995).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the number of publications on the theory of ecological art and environmental aesthetics has increased significantly. The research problems are becoming more diverse and complex. First, knowledge about the practice of eco-art continues to accumulate exponentially (Gossin, 2015, Crouch 2015, Machotka 2018 etc.). In addition, the research is becoming more focused on revealing pedagogical potential of ecological art, the role of artists in the activist movement (Vesna 2006). New understanding of ecological art as an active means of influencing public consciousness brought to the forefront the question of interaction between artists, exhibition venues and the audience (Roe and Buser 2016). In this regard, the study of the ethical aspect of ecological art is also actively developing (Anderson 2015, Brady 2014, Holmes 2002). Science comes to understanding the role of eco-art activism in saving the global world, overcoming the crisis of a planetary scale (Dunaway 2009, Masco 2017, Weintraub 2012). The concept of the *anthropocene* is also becoming an urgent trend in the theory of ecological art and aesthetics (Kirksey 2012, Mengyao 2017). In the context of the new era, scientists are seeking to rethink the existing concepts of environmentalism (Simus 2008). Of particular interest is Carlson's attempt to identify the differences between Eastern eco-aesthetics and Western environmental aesthetics (Carlson 2017).

Recent literature has tried to define the latest trends in ecological art, to comprehend the accumulated theoretical experience of studying the problem. For

example, Brown's *Art & Ecology Now* (2014) offers a look at the recent development of contemporary artistic initiatives related to nature, the environment, climate change and ecology. The study consists of six thematic sections that provide analysis of different levels of artists' involvement in environmental issues: from those who document and reflect on nature, to those who use the physical environment as a raw artistic material, to dedicated activists who strive to create art that changes human attitudes and habits.

The modern eco-art theory mainly focuses on analyzing eco-art as such, explaining the concept through embedding it in the historical process. The present study offers a new approach to the consideration and analysis of the issue. Generalizing artistic experience of various countries, the study highlights universals, which can be traced in the world art, so it can form a general idea of the nature of eco-art as a universally significant global artistic phenomenon.

4. Destruction, the adverse consequences of technological revolution – a reflection on the topic of the industrial civilization in visual art

Zhao Xiaojia chose his hometown Jingzhou – an industrial city in Liaoning province – as an object of his art. Drawing from personal experience, the artist recalls and observes the modern-day industrial landscape that unfolds in front of his eyes. The oblique and grotesque industrial imagery in his works poses as an artistic reinterpretation of the modern industrial civilization. Looking through most of Zhao Xiaojia's works, one might notice that almost all of the paintings are composed in the format of a panoramic view from above, filled with sullen tones, and include images of miscellaneous chaotic industrial structures, chimneys, pipelines, etc.

The "Big Factories" series (2000, see Fig. 1) is a characteristic artwork by Zhao Xiaojia. Grayscale images of factory ruins, symbolizing the initial overly enthusiastic aspiration to increase the scope of industrial development, are filled with humankind's helplessness and insignificance in the face of the colossal destruction brought on by industrialization. In all of these works the artist utilizes modern ways of artistic expression to create landscapes of large-scale industry. The paintings are filled with awe and contemplation of industrial civilization, as well as with criticisms of industrial radicalism.

"A Lonely Factory" created by Zhao Xiaojia in 1997 is characterized by a tilted horizon, complex and tangled chimneys, massive industrial ruins clad in darkness. The artist reflects on the environment he grew up in and on his memories of the factories, juxtaposing those reflections with the modern deserted 'ruins of industrial civilization' which no longer stand for social progress. Drawing from his own experience, the artist faces reality alongside spiritual and ecological crises. Red and black serve as the main colors in Zhao Xiaojia's works, embodying industrial landscapes. Black symbolizes decay, grimness and desolation of industrial scenery, whereas red stands for uncertainty, desperate struggle and burn-up of large-scale industry – the passion, wrath and deep emotion felt by the modern-day artist. Not



Fig. 1. Zhao Xiaojia, “Big Factories”. A series. Size unknown. Oil on canvas, 2000.

only is it an objective depiction of a large-scale industry landscape, but it is also a symbolic image of the intense worry that the artist feels about decaying industrial landscapes and the standards of living intertwined with the latter.

Country scenery in ecology-themed art becomes a way to expose the adverse impact of human civilization on nature. Bei Cun, a Chinese writer, witnessed in his book *The One Who Came Back Home*:

Traveling through somber, decaying, closed off and filled with noise cities, it is impossible to stop the spiritual defeat. All sorts of arrogance, tyranny and cruelty, all kinds of pressure, the gradually evading humanity, worsening ecological environment and noisy streets altogether create a brutal picture of modern man struggling for life space within a confined environment (Bei 1994: 27).

After the 1990s, China witnessed an unprecedented construction boom and urbanization. While on the one hand, massive demolition and relocation works kicked off, leading to high-rise buildings springing up one after another, on the other hand, urban construction sprawled uncontrollably and devoured more and more territories. As a result of modern civilization development, tranquil agricultural villages perished, clean environment was transformed into greedy and ever-expanding city factories, and large fields were turned into landfills and sewers of the urban civilization.

Zhan Shan (占山) as a Chinese artist is deeply and gravely concerned about the fact that urbanization is destroying homes and homelands. He grew up and lived in Beijing where the process of urbanization and modernization can be viewed as a miniature replica of China’s economic development as a whole. Humanity’s aspirations formed a critical ‘mass’ that is quickly and relentlessly destroying the fragile environment. With expanding consumption and material ambitions, alongside the rapidly increasing population, one might say that cities’ demand for territory has reached unprecedented levels. As an artist who has been living in suburban Beijing since his childhood, Zhan Shan is more capable than anyone else of experiencing the spiritual damage caused by urban development. In the artworks of Zhan Shan

one can find lone-standing plants that look like famished marionettes expressing desperation and overwhelming grief; cracked mountain ranges appear to be sighing and bowing their heads; gullied riverbeds seem to be nature's wounds inflicted by humanity.

In a series titled "A River Disappearing in the Distance" (2010), Zhan Shan through delicate detailed strokes depicts the crime scenes of modern industrial civilization. "A River Disappearing in the Distance – 4" looks like a dusty old photograph, with chaotic yellowish tone on the borders of the image resembling a layer of dust that has not been wiped away completely. With the help of dark tones and a realistic painting technique, the artist depicts a dry shoal in a riverbed, its stones that were once submerged in water, but are now dried by the sun, and thriving weeds that cover large areas of the ground, all of which depicts crushing loneliness and despair. Through this imagery, Zhan Shan subtly yet resolutely demonstrates the ecological damage done to his homeland.

In "A River Disappearing in the Distance – 5" Zhan Shan, through the contrast between colors and black-and-white tones, shows the dreamy nature of his homeland and the current state of the environment. In the upper part of the painting, the grim sky is covered with layers of dark clouds, but in the bottom part – a reflection of the dried-up lake – a vivid memory of a once blue sky and white clouds remains. Deploying the 'white clouds against blue sky' image that has universal ecological meaning, Zhan Shan reveals the toll taken on humanity's home and the pure homeland in the era of modern industrial civilization. Paintings from these series are devoid of the bitter criticism typical of Zhan Shan's "The Last Memories – A Red Series". In one of the artworks from "The Last Memories" series, where a dead tree trunk is positioned against a dark-red background, the powerful language of visual expression represents a resolute protest against imbalance within natural environment and destruction of humanity's home. However, in "A River Disappearing in the Distance" the artist stepped away from expressionism and turned towards realism, analyzing the sadness and longing of dreams about homeland and the disappearing home through tranquil and simple, yet concise and deep expression.

Cui Guotai (崔国泰) was born in Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning province, the cradle of China's heavy industry. Cui Guotai's artworks are based on the memories of industrial districts in his home province. In "Brigade Lunch" painted in 1987 the artist paid close attention to the daily lives of miners, representatives of the lower social class. Later Cui Guotai realistically painted locomotives, industrial buildings, construction sites and other scenes of China's industrialization. The industrial political landscape first appeared in Cui Guotai's works in 2006 and has remained there prominently until now.

The 2007 painting "Shougang Group Under the Setting Sun" depicts a Beijing metallurgical plant being prepared for dismantling and relocating. The painting reflected a mark left by the brilliant industrial civilization in the context of the political sentiment of the era. "A Red Workshop" (2009, see Fig. 2) represents the artist's memories connected with the signs of industrial decay: once magnificent, factories have become lifeless and hollow, former achievements have been replaced by new



Fig. 2. Cui Guotai, “A Red Workshop”. 200 x 300 cm. Oil on canvas, 2009.

key development objects. In this painting, Cui Guotai recreated an atmosphere of glory and reverence, the image unfolds in front of the viewer’s eyes as stills from a black-and-white film. Having passed the test of time, feelings too have turned black-and-white – it is only this two-colored simplicity that can most accurately represent the former grandeur of images and the fragility of existence. Cui Guotai managed to capture a historical moment gradually erased from memory. His landscape reminds of an essay that unveils quiet political imagery.

Many artists interpret the theme of technological revolution affecting the environment through the images of collision between urban and natural spaces. Paintings by A. Rockman, D. Ambarzumjan, M.-L. Varey show a dual depiction of nature and the city: on the one hand, they are in juxtaposition, but on the other hand, a deep and unbreakable bond between the two is revealed.

David Ambarzumjan creates vividly expressive and deeply meaningful ecological paintings that become a symbiosis of urban and natural scenery. His multifaceted work titled “Human Nature” (2018, see Fig. 3) is a landscape full of light and color. Horizontal layers of the blue sky, green forests and fields form a well-balanced composition and create a feeling of calmness and harmony. But this serenity is crossed over by a stroke of thick gray paint within which the artist meticulously depicts the vertically aligned walls and skyscrapers of a city, giving a bird’s eye view of the buildings, which makes them seem small and unimportant, fragile against the backdrop of lofty and vigorous nature. D. Ambarzumjan highlights the interconnectedness of the two worlds by running two connecting river streams through both of them. The flow of the water is symbolically associated with changes in time – more negative than positive, it seems.



Fig. 3. D. Ambarzumjan, “Human Nature”. Size unknown. Oil on canvas, 2018.

“Hazy Notion” (2020) is composed of a misty-gray upper part and a bright-yellow bottom part. The top showcases highly detailed images of sullen city structures soaking in dark smog. Some birds flying past the lifeless glass and concrete blocks are pushing through the smog. With one brushstroke, David Ambarzumjan erases the joyless urban mirage, interrupting its existence and inhabiting one of the streets with soft grass, young trees reaching for the sun and a spotted deer in the foreground. The deer is looking up anxiously, alarmed by the birds flying from some different reality. The motif of the two worlds intertwined can be found within the time-worn buildings taken over by trees and the half-rotten carcass of a deserted car. It is worth noting that the city part is crafted meticulously, whereas the lower section of the picture is painted with free strokes, focusing on the circular upward motion.

Another bright-blue window to a different dimension can be found in Ambarzumjan’s painting “Sharks in Montmartre” (2020) where the artist depicts majestic sea creatures leisurely maneuvering not among corals, but between the flooded remains of an old human city. Schools of small fish are swiftly swimming between window frames, with the endless blue of the ocean in the background. The artist makes the edges of this portal uneven, as if they were markings of paint on canvas. The shape of the ‘brushstroke’ reminds of the golden ratio and weaves inwards like a shell, drawing the viewer inside a whirlpool. The stark contrast between the world of nature deserted by men and the real street of a grey city is clearly not in favor of the latter. Straight lines of the sidewalks and of even, rhythmically divided façades seem unwelcoming and cold. Even the dog in the foreground looks grey, as if broken by the sullenness and bareness of this urban landscape.

In an artwork “Dreams of a City: Forest” M.-L. Varey (Milo) shows a fragment of forest scenery in the middle of an urban landscape. The artist illustrates an idea that nowadays urban space has become a reservoir of humanity’s dreams and projects. People are striving to live in cities rather than in the countryside, which is becoming less and less populated. Our planet and its inhabitants are rapidly changing – cities expand, concrete and nature become more and more intertwined. In a few years, almost 75% of the planet will be city-dwellers. In this world, what would nature’s place be?

Over a couple of decades, Alexis Rockman has been showcasing a gloomily surrealistic view of the collision between civilization and nature. In the artist’s epic paintings that are filled with apocalyptic scenarios which were reviewed by critics as toxic and grandiose, one might clearly trace the key theme Rockman is pondering and notice the meticulous depiction of scientific and technological details, the skillful deployment of color and the monumental scale of the artworks. Quite illustrative is the title of one of Rockman’s personal exhibitions – “Rubicon” (2013). The saying, which originated after Julius Caesar crossed Rubicon in 49 B.C. and later became synonymous with the ‘point of no return’, refers to the artist’s conviction that irreparable damage has been done to our natural world.

Two epic paintings showcased at the exhibition were thematically connected with New York City where Alexis Rockman was born in 1962 and where he continues to reside. The monumental painting “Bronx Zoo” (2012–2013) depicts with virtuosity and wit an anarchistic scene amid the ruins of New York’s most legendary zoo, founded in 1899. The zoo’s neoclassic buildings and court have been overtaken by animals that inhabit it. Although human figures are absent in Rockman’s painting, their existence is implied by the decay of their buildings and the debris of their society.

Under the warm light of the setting sun, spectacular flashes of emerald green, deep blue and pink ‘radiate’. Their brightness is increased through connection with pearl gray surfaces. In the colorful chaos, exotic animals, which live, reproduce and die amidst the zoo ruins, begin to take shape. The architecture of the ruins makes it quite easy to recognize the remains of the famous Bronx Zoo. However, instead of being caged, systematized and recorded in the likeness of museum items, the animals for some reason managed to free themselves from the confines and the dictatorship imposed on them by humankind. Prior rationality and austerity gave way to the laws of wild nature that metaphorically remind us of the laws which operate within human society. The artist highlights the brutality of the new world devoid of humans by adhering to a chaotic and overly detailed composition and showcasing the extreme savageness and despair of everything that is happening amidst residual waste.

Bronx Zoo is of great significance to the artist because it sits at the crossroads of human culture and the world of nature. It is the ‘last bastion for biodiversity’ (Alexis Rockman), a place for protecting and conserving those animals whose natural habitat has been destroyed. This dystopian narrative pushes the boundaries of traditional art in terms of visual expression and content, as well as bringing forth the most pressing ecological issues of today.

The second epic painting in the exhibition was “Gowanus” (2013, see Fig. 4). For the object of his painting, the artist chose Gowanus, a New York City canal that has become one of the most polluted places on the planet. The surface of the water is stained with colorful toxic waste vividly depicted in the works of American artist and photographer Steven Hirsch. As far as Alexis Rockman is concerned, his painting focuses on what is discarded and/or discharged because of urban development and mechanization.

Once a rich and prosperous wetland with a thriving ecosystem, Gowanus Canal has turned into the site of a devastating ecological catastrophe. It has become a putrid reminder of New York’s industrial past, contaminated by PCBs, coal tar wastes, heavy metals and volatile organics – the water burns green at times and has a sulfurous smell in the summer. Rockman was inspired to portray this site when in the winter of 2013, a dolphin swam into the polluted waterway and died the same day – an event chronicled in *The New York Times* on 26 January 2013 (Alexis Rockman).

The artist horizontally divides the painting into three uneven parts. The upper section shows a city of skyscrapers, blue in the evening mist. The tall buildings surpass the boundaries of the canvas, which creates a visual illusion of their unlimited height. The cold tones of their surfaces ‘explode’ with splashes of bright color that could be either advertisements or the skyscraper lights. However, there’s no light



Fig. 4. Alexis Rockman, “Gowanus”. 182.88 x 228.6 cm. Oil on wood. 2013.

coming from the windows, and the massive buildings seem lifeless and empty. It appears that only the middle layer of the urban jungle is brimming with life which thrives amidst pileups of concrete blocks and metal sewage structures erupting with acid-colored sludge. Cats, rats and squirrels, all well familiar to city-dwellers, inhabit this joyless landscape that is brightened up by a lonely tree with red flowers and bright green leaves. The brightness of the middle section contrasts with the dullness of the lower 'layer' filled with murky brown water that is home to alien looking fish. But even those strange fish look less alien compared with the creature swimming in the central part. This creature appears to have been hastily and messily made-up of body parts belonging to other inhabitants of the underwater world. Perhaps this very mutant, according to the artist's vision, represents the result of life that is unfolding in the skyscrapers above and that is changing the world around it beyond recognition.

5. Ecological catastrophe and post-apocalyptic landscapes in ecological art

Technogenic catastrophes have unfortunately become an inextricable part of reality. Inflicting horrifying damage on the environment and human health, these catastrophes inevitably bring about an amplified public outcry. Ecological artists who cannot remain on the sidelines of the problem depict the horrific consequences of the latter employing an unlimited arsenal of artistic expression.

Within the "Smog Collectors" series by American artist Kim Abeles (since 1987), city smog has been used as a way of creative expression that demonstrates how polluted urban air is. At "The Coming World: Ecology as the New Politics 2030–2100" exhibition in Moscow, Abeles presented her works created with particles of Moscow smog. Susan Schuppli's "Delay Decay" art project refers to the tragedy and the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident. "We have seen numerous photographs depicting deserted homes in the Exclusion Zone, however in the eyes of Susan Schuppli these works are too romantic (as ruins are generally perceived as romantic). So, in her own work, Schuppli opts for dry conceptualism. She shows us twenty "Pravda" newspaper covers, from April 26th, 1986, when the Chernobyl accident occurred, and May 14th, 1986, when the news of the catastrophe was finally published in the leading newspaper of the Soviet Union. The artist is interested in the information politics surrounding 'the peaceful atom'. In fact, scientists have not come to a definitive conclusion as to whether it would take centuries or millennia for the consequences to be resolved; radioactive decay will last long into the future, whereas the consequences of the catastrophe continue to play out today.

In his "Black Tide / Marea negra" (see Fig. 5), Allan Sekula turns to another ecological catastrophe that came to pass in 2002 in the proximity of the Spanish shore. It was the largest oil spill, the consequences of which will most likely be fully mitigated only by the year 2032. The project is distinctly documentary, realistic and deep. Polluted, deformed beyond recognition, disfigured landscape, helplessness and desperation of volunteers who were tirelessly trying to assist in coping with the crisis. Melancholy brought on by the images of the catastrophe and the efforts held



Fig. 5. A. Sekula, “Black Tide / Marea Negra”. Color analogue print from slide, libretto, 2002/2003.

by ecologists and volunteers are intertwined here with the creation of open-ended future scenarios. This approach, far from photojournalism, which the artist himself calls ‘critical realism,’ is essentially an attempt to look at a concrete accident within the multi-faceted complex reality and timeframe that often eludes the newspaper spotlight (Sekula). Powerful imagery created by Allan Sekula gives the viewer a first-hand experience and feeling of horror.

Allan Sekula’s photo series is complemented by pondering the long-term effect of the largest anthropogenic ecological catastrophe near European shores. Photographs are accompanied by an opera libretto describing events 30 years in the future, in the year 2032 when, according to experts, the regional ecosystems would recover after the accident (Sekula).

No less dramatic are the doomsday paintings revealing apocalyptic scenes to people stuck in their everyday hustle. For instance, Dima Rebus’ works depict the futility of human struggles and aspirations in the face of an impending and unavoidable catastrophe. The “Asteroid doesn’t care if you’re having fun” (2018, see Fig. 6) watercolor is very characteristic in this sense. In his typical manner, the artist shows idyllic views of nature in the foreground. In the bottom-right corner one can see a shore covered with pale-pink and snow-white flower buds and grass. On the left-hand side they are as if opposed by a coarse metal bar holding up a bird box. Two swallows fly over to the nest to feed their offspring. Calm grayish-purple water,

be it sea or ocean, aligns well with the overall sentiment. However, a warning sign fixed on top of the bird box captures the viewer's attention and directs it towards the sky where one immediately finds a meteorite shooting towards the Earth's surface at a tremendous speed. The meteorite's fiery trace cuts through dark clouds and heads towards the blossoming shore, threatening everything that lives. Quite ironic in these surroundings seems the inscription on the warning sign: "Please do not drop your cigarette butts on the ground".

In his painting "Candy" (2018), the artist plants the dark vertical of a traffic light mast with multiple street sign holders against the gentle lavender-pink tint of the morning sky. The street signs are long gone, and their mounts have turned into perches for multi-colored parrots and other exotic birds. Only one sign remains, turned away from the viewers. But judging by its backside, it has long been neglected, and the same fate awaits it that has already taken down all the other signs. Despite the feeling of abandonment, traffic lights are shining brightly, albeit all at once, which indicates a malfunction of the optical system. Dim colors are in perfect harmony with the sky and the birds. The only bright spots that stand out are the tail feathers of some of the birds, and the rose buds reaching up for the sun or for the traffic lights. The artist displays the well-being of birds that would otherwise have gone extinct in the world populated by humans, and the vigorous growth of plants, impossible on



Fig. 6. D. Rebus, "Asteroid doesn't care if you're having fun".
58 x 78 cm. Watercolor on paper, 2018.

today's roads. All of this refers to the immense power of nature that, given freedom from human oppression, can resurrect itself and use the results of anthropogenic activity for its own good.

In "The Woman" (2015, see Fig. 7) Dima Rebus masterfully utilizes the expressive abilities of watercolor to create a mushroom-shaped white cloud transpiring amidst the dark of the night sky, a powerful whirlwind underneath it and spherical shockwaves moving through space. The terrifying scale of the nuclear explosion in the background is in stark contrast with the image of a plump woman in a plain dress walking towards the viewer. She is walking away, squinting in the wind and clutching her bags. It seems that the woman either doesn't realize the presence of a looming danger, or having realized that there is no escape, decides to continue on her way. Here lies an attempt by the artist to show the futility of any hope of escape in the event of a nuclear catastrophe.

Alexis Rockman has been thinking a lot about epidemics in the history of humankind ever since he moved from New York City to Connecticut due to the coronavirus pandemic. He discovers a link both between the current unfolding crisis and the epidemic crises of the past, like the Black Death that occurred in medieval Europe, and the ecological catastrophes brought on by anthropogenic activity, such as the introduction of invasive species. "It's interesting to contextualise what's happening in our lives, within the historical lens of the many times this has happened before," Rockman says, "and there's such an interconnectedness to habitat, biodiversity crisis and habitat loss" (Stoilas 2020). While stuck in isolation, Rockman was working on a new watercolor series titled "The Things They Carried" and depicting animals



Fig. 7. D. Rebus. The Woman. Size unknown. Watercolor on paper. 2015.



Fig. 8. A. Rockman, "Hagia Sophia". 45.7 x 61 cm. Paper, watercolor, acrylic paint, 2020.

against the backdrop of apocalyptic scenes. One element that unites all paintings in the series is the presence of bats and rats, two presumed carriers and transmitters of horrible diseases that would later pass on to humans. Such are the works "Liberty Island" (2020), "Hong Kong" (2020), "Taj Mahal" (2020) or "Hagia Sophia" (2020, see Fig. 8).

"Hawaii" is yet another painting displaying animals that the artist placed on a raft in the middle of the ocean. A hen, a fox and a pig are all the inhabitants of nature taken out of their natural habitat and used as pets or as food. Using a shipwreck metaphor, the artist explores an important topic of the fate of the natural world that had become 'shipwrecked' (Stoilas 2020) by the human civilization that decomposes the ecosystem. There is a lizard drifting on a chunk of wood towards Liberty Island surrounded by container cranes; a pig, a fox and a hen are cruising towards Hawaii; a rat is heading in the direction of Saint Sophia; a monkey on top of a log is swimming towards Taj Mahal. The image of Liberty Island is sinking in an industrial landscape offset by a blaze that exacerbates the feeling of anxiousness and unease, while Saint Sophia, with its dim silhouette and neon shades, looks like a fragment of a futuristic post-apocalyptic world.

One can notice the unsteady state of the animals that are racing towards a new world, as if searching for the former glory of the human civilization – it is no accident that the artist often depicts key historic monuments. According to Rockman, these

‘have no context, they’re nowhere’ (Stoilas 2020). However, the people responsible for the fact that those creatures were deprived of their natural habitat and artificially transferred into the world of men, have paid the price as well. Those animals have brought on diseases and imbalances in the ecosystem. According to Rockman, these dynamics have formed civilization, which makes the current crisis perhaps inevitable (Stoilas 2020).

In his “Newtown Creek” (2014), Rockman in his traditional manner depicts a world in the fantastic realism. He goes to extremes in detail and nuances, while at the same time increasing color intensity. It is precisely that which gives his works a feeling of unreality. The viewer tries to solve a riddle, to find an ‘extra detail’ which would point out that the world created by Rockman is not real, but futuristic. This desire becomes even stronger when one realizes the scale of the catastrophic tragedy that nature has to endure because of human activity. The underwater world in the bottom part of the picture covered in blue-green streams of sewage continues to exist among human waste. The central part of the painting presents a whale tail covered in ridges formed in battle. It seems that the mighty animal is about to whip its tail and continue its way in the depths of the sea. However, looking at the part of the whale that is visible above water, one notices a horrifying detail, a taken-out piece of flesh. Here on top of the corpse sits a bird with two heads, a mutant reminiscent of the ancient symbol of humankind’s imperial ambition. Higher up in the glow of dawn mixed with grayish smog loom the outlines of a big city towering on top of tall cliffs and not concerned with the events of the ‘lower’ world that is drowning in the city’s sewage and trash.

David Ambarzumjan’s painting “Running out of Time” (2020) serves as a warning to humanity that got carried away with technology play. The painting’s composition is diagonally divided into two parts. In the top-right corner bright fiery colors dominate, whereas the bottom-left corner is filled with cold white-blue shades. However, the warmth of the upper part is nothing more than an illusion, for it masks a world of fire and death. The shores are covered with crimson mist from the fires, and the charred skeleton of a massive creature is lying in the foreground. The setting sun spreads its bloody rays over the joyless scenery that the artist is trying to conceive and balance with the cold idyll of the bottom. The lower part of the painting depicts endless ice fields among which penguins and their offspring are roaming, symbolizing the continuation of life and the hope of renaissance. The grim picture of the ecological apocalypse is in stark contrast with a utopian world. The author lets the viewer decide which of the worlds they want to be a part of.

6. Conclusions

At the end of the 20th century, artists began to react to environmental changes in the following manner: by drawing certain objects, for instance, neglected factories, vast nature or various living creatures, they reflected metaphors, reinterpretation and criticism of the ever-decaying ecological environment. Through their works, artists

tried to recreate, imitate or reconstruct the interaction between humanity and the environment, thus mitigating the ever-reappearing environmental problems.

To sum up, the data explored in the research have revealed that modern art closely deals with the consequences of the technological revolution and the development of industrial civilization, as well as the problem of current and future ecological catastrophes that might place humanity and the environment on the verge of extinction. The analysis of the artists' works has highlighted that these problems, like all other ecological issues, do not appear isolated but become interconnected with other vectors of ecological research. The fact that creators from different countries all over the world appeal to these problems proves that these thematic directions are becoming universal in world art. Not only do they form ecological art of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st century, but they also define global ecological conscience.

Despite the fact that artists perceive this scope of problems differently in the context of artistic comprehension, expression and in terms of philosophical, activist and other viewpoints, a provocative activist approach prevails, with artworks seen as a way to actively make an impact on the audience and the mass viewer in order to facilitate the formation of ecological responsibility and ecological conscience in the society as a whole. In this sense, artists aim to express their ideas by using a universal language that can be understood in all corners of the world.

The imagery that dominates ecological art is deeply tragic; it is aimed at creating a graphical display of the terrifying scale and the consequences of the unfolding ecological crisis, hence images of suffering, dying, feelings of impending doom and despair. One way or another, humanity ends up in the middle of this narrative: humans are deemed unconditionally guilty of creating environmental problems and the idea is formulated that every one of us is responsible for our actions towards the world of nature.

Declaration

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