

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia de Arte et Educatione 19 (2024)

ISSN 2081-3325

DOI 10.24917/20813325.19.7

Karolina Kolenda

ORCID 0000-0001-6749-0399

Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie

Making art in the Białowieża Forest: from late avant-garde *plein-air* to artistic field research

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the natural environment within artistic practices and art-related discourses. This interest arises from urgent environmental concerns, such as climate change, global warming, and violent weather phenomena, as well as from the spatial and posthumanist turns in the humanities. Emerging in this context, contemporary artistic practices aim to redefine the relationship between art and nature, acknowledging its source in the opposition between nature and culture – a fissure fundamental to the formation of modern aesthetics and its key concepts. In the 21st century, this re-evaluation of modern culture’s idea of nature comes with simultaneous revision of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practices that engaged with the environment. Developing in recent decades, environmental (or ecocritical) art history seeks to address those aspects of art production and reception that were beyond the scope of traditional art historical scholarship, with its exclusive focus on form and meaning. Alan C. Braddock stresses that while traditional art history

[...] frames environmental issues narrowly in terms of “landscape” aesthetics or “nature” idealised as pristinely non-human and ex-urban, ecocriticism considers *any* environment and artefact to be potentially worthy of consideration, regardless of location, medium, or constituents (Braddock, 2015: 449).

In *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, Andrew Patrizio formulates a fundamental premise of ecocritical art history: to reconfigure the notion of nature so that it is no longer treated in (art historical) terms of aesthetic value or as

a material resource. Nature reconfigured in ecocritical terms is understood as imbued with “agency, intention and emotion” (Patrizio, 2019: 16).

The purpose of this text is to investigate the relationship between art production and the environment, or more precisely, the relationship between art making and the ideological constructions of the environment. Taking the forest as the main point of reference, I analyse it as an element of the environment that was and still remains of great significance to the state, both as a natural material resource and as an abstract idea that works as a synecdoche of nature as a whole (also as a synecdoche of the nation, national heritage, rootedness, etc.). The article focuses on the Białowieża Forest [Puszcza Białowieska], a forest of exceptional status as a national symbol (Schama, 1995: 53–61; Barcz, 2017: 32–39) and part of global natural heritage as World Heritage site. I discuss art events that took place in the forest and its immediate surroundings. Two of them are cyclical events organised during the peak of the Polish *plein-air* art festival movement (Ogólnopolski Plener Białowieski, Białowieża 1965–1983; sculpture meetings in Hajnówka, 1966–1987); another event is a 2016 artistic field research project *Wracając do Białowieży* [*Returning to Białowieża*], organised and curated by Tomasz Koszewnik and Jan Szewczyk partly as a polemical revision of the traditional *plein-air* art festival. The events were selected to investigate the transformation of artistic practices, involving an organised group of artists working in a natural setting, throughout the period between the 1960s and the early 21st century. Although this transformation reflects a general change in artistic practice and its definitions (with the important recent development of artistic research), my argument is that it also reflects the changes in the definition of the forest that occurred in the late 20th century in post-Socialist Poland. The comparison of the tenets and ideological foundations of the events will allow me to discuss the relationship between artistic ideas of working in nature and the construction of nature (or parts thereof) as an ideological concept. It will be argued that the Socialist idea of nature as a material resource was manifested in the organisation of artistic life in Socialist Poland and the way artists responded to and used the natural environment where they worked. Similarly, the artistic research project, organised in Białowieża in 2016, will be examined in reference to the post-Socialist transition to sustainable forestry and the debates on the National Forest Programme in Poland in 2013–2015.

Making art in a Socialist forest

In Poland, in the second half of the 20th century, there can be observed a rapidly growing popularity of making art in the open air. The *plein-air* [plener in Polish] becomes a prevalent method of artistic education and a model of organising state-funded art meetings. As Bernadeta Stano contends, in Socialist Poland, both the methods and the objectives of *plein-air* events were not much different from their 19th-century predecessors (Stano, 2017: 216). However, from the early 1960s onwards they crystallised into a strictly regulated format: state-funded, meticulously planned events with specified programmes and collaboration between local art institutions or associations and industry: factories, plants, mines, etc. (Stano, 2017: 217–218). Resulting from

the new cultural policy and its formulation in the document specifying the terms of the agreement between the Council of the Workers' Unions and the ZPAP, this format practically decentralised cultural and artistic life in Poland and established the system of industrial patronage (Stano, 2019: 27–66).

This system allowed artistic associations and institutions to seek the patronage of local industries in an effort to establish cyclical art events with long-term funding. In the Białowieża region, the first of such initiatives involved the organisation of a *plein-air* festival in 1965, with the majority of participants working in the medium of painting. The following year, a separate event for sculptors was inaugurated. Although other art festivals and meetings were also organised in the Białystok province, the focus will be on the two mentioned above.

The cyclical *plein-air* events for painters have been organised in Białowieża since 1965, with the post-*plein-air* painting exhibitions held at the BWA Gallery in Białystok. Each year, the list of invited artists varied, yet several names are recurrent, suggesting that some artists repeatedly welcomed an opportunity to work in Białowieża. Although the location of the event in a unique natural setting might have been an important factor, it must be emphasised that the participants did not actually work in the open air. For instance, during the 1975/1976 edition (stretched over three seasons), each artist was provided with a single room at the “Iwa” hotel at the Białowieża National Park, which also worked as a studio, and equipped with painting materials, such as five canvases, two sets of paints, paper, brushes, etc. (Wołkowycki, 1976: 2). The detailed plan of the event suggests that, over the course of a 30-day stay, the artists' contact with the surrounding woodland landscape was limited to an organised cart trip around the forest, a visit to the Nature and Forest Museum, and individual tours of the National Park (Wołkowycki, 1976, p. 2).

While the local landscape served as a source of inspiration for artists participating in the *plein-air* and was often depicted in their work, this was not a rule. Their approach to nature was clearly formed by the Modernist formalist tradition, which dismissed realism (and even figuration) in favour of a personal interpretation of the observed landscape. This approach finds its numerous confirmations in written statements by the event organisers, published in catalogues accompanying the post-*plein-air* exhibitions. Teresa Sowińska, in her text for the catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition of the *plein-air* works in 1971, writes that although the landscape is

[...] at the forefront of painterly investigations, which obligates even artists who concentrate on completely different problems and topics, it is a pretext for works whose meaning goes far beyond the superficial visual fascination (Sowińska, 1971: 9).

Moreover, she suggests that the majority of artists are “resistant” to the picturesque beauty of nature and instead of copying it, they interpret it, reflecting their individual styles (Sowińska, 1971: 10).

Works reproduced in the 1971 catalogue confirm Sowińska's assessment. For instance, Kazimierz Ostrowski's *Landscape from Białowieża* offers a view of a natural setting with details only vaguely resembling a group of trees. Clearly, the author



Fig. 1. Kazimierz Ostrowski, *Landscape from Białowieża* [Pejzaż z Białowieży], 1971 (Sowińska, 1971: 69)

interpreted the forest avoiding the rules of the Picturesque and introducing instead a post-Cubist translation of observed reality into cuboid structures.

Interestingly, it was an invited non-Polish artist (the organisers always invited several participants from abroad), the Japanese painter Masayoshi Sasaki, whose pessimistic, Surrealist work was noted for its expressed “warning” and defence of “nature under threat” (Sowińska, 1971: 10).

In Poland, but also internationally, the early 1970s mark the period of increasing concern for the state of the natural environment, which is manifested during several *plein-air* events, for instance at Plener Osiecki in Osieki in 1972 and at Plener Ziemia Zgorzelecka in Opolno Zdrój in 1971. These events were also important for the development of Conceptual and ephemeral practices in Polish art. In contrast and in open opposition to these trends, over the course of its 1970s editions, the painting *plein-air* in Białowieża seeks to reassert the Modernist status of painting and the role of art as separate from non-artistic reality. In a tellingly titled text, *In defence of painting*, published in the exhibition catalogue of the festival from 1973/1974, Helena Prokopowicz-Lipniecka writes that “a contemporary artist usually works alone, engaging his entire imagination in his studio. Nature ceased to be the main source of inspiration” (Prokopowicz-Lipniecka 1974: 3). Although the Białowieża meeting is seen by her as an opportunity to “leave the studio” and “meet nature and other artists”, she concludes that what links the participants is the “belief that painting makes sense even in such a complicated

world as today” (Prokopowicz-Lipniecka 1974: 5). Significantly, both this edition, as well as three subsequent ones were organised under the slogan *In defence of painting*, while their programmes continued the experiment of investigating the “impact of the natural environment on the artist” (Wołkowycki, 1976: 2). The “defence of painting” is presented as necessary to save it from “death” in the light of the onslaught of new trends, such as happening, Conceptual art, and impossible art (Wołkowycki, 1976: 2).

The organisers’ staunch adherence to the paradigm of Modernist painting (with simultaneous dismissal of the neo-avant-garde shift towards the performative, ephemeral, and site-specific) is clear from the way the meetings were organised. As Stano emphasises, the focus on the role of the artists’ individual work in the studio (where their observations of nature were “reworked”) is manifested in photographs that document their solitary efforts in studios/hotel rooms, but even more so in the decision (made at the 7th edition) to allow artists to finish their works after the event and exhibit them before the subsequent edition the following year (Stano, 2018: 449). This shows that direct contact with the natural environment was important only inasmuch as it did not interfere with a standard artmaking process. Although organised in the vicinity of Europe’s last “primaeval forest”, the *plein-air* event did not seek to address its status as a cultural landmark or ecosystem of special significance, but primarily treated the forest as a source of artistic inspiration. One of its later editions, organised in 1983 by Bożena Kowalska, brought together 33 Polish geometrical abstractionists (Kowalska, 2003). From the current perspective – when it is impossible to think about art and its relationship with the environment without considering the tradition of site-specificity – the choice of Białowieża as a place to create geometric abstraction may seem surprising. However, in Poland, the postwar decades (particularly the period after the “Thaw” of 1953) brought a long-lasting dominance of Modernism with its insistence on medium-specificity (Markowska, 2012: 11–21). Equally important for Polish postwar art was the European tradition of Modern art, which construed nature as a resource of basic, primal forms, compositions and colour systems, as well as “primordially”. An important model for Polish artists came from the artistic colony in St. Ives in Cornwall, where the “wild”, “prehistoric” nature inspired landscape and marine painters, e.g. allusive abstraction of Piotr Potworowski, but also the abstract art of Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, and Henry Moore, with the latter enjoying the greatest international recognition in the 1950s. Moore’s impact on Polish art was particularly powerful after his travelling exhibition in several Polish cities in 1959–1960 (Rydiger, 2018). Echoing the Modernist paradigm, organisers of the Białowieża painting *plein-air* event insisted that Modern art rejected mimetic ambitions in favour of a creative interpretation of forms found in nature, understanding that nature’s beauty can be a negative force that hinders artistic individuality (Jaskuła, cited in Stano, 2017: 217).

In 1966, the ZPAP association inaugurated an event for sculptors in Hajnówka, in cooperation with the local wood industry (Hajnowskie Zakłady Przemysłu Drzewnego). This event, organised annually until 1987, was addressed mainly to artists working with wood and, similarly to the painting *plein-air* but unlike most art festivals organised in Poland at the time, it did not entail lectures or discussions. The idea for both Białowieża events was to offer artists a time, place, and material so that they could work in and with

nature. The main objective of the festival was to establish the “Polish School of Wood” and make Hajnówka the national centre of wooden sculpture. However, the local aspect of the event was equally important, and the organisers sought to emphasise this fact not only through the use of locally sourced materials but also by encouraging artists to refer to the local vernacular culture and unique natural environment of the Białowieża Forest. However, the local subject matter addressed by works produced during these events centred mostly on local history. In the early 1970s, the organisers proposed framing themes that focused on science and technology, as well as the festival patron – the wood processing plant (Stano, 2018: 433–454). Sculptures produced during the events varied thematically and formally, with works often showing simplified human figures (e.g. Teodora Stasiak’s *Acrobats* [*Akrobatki*]) and abstract compositions (e.g. Zofia Puciłowska’s *Ray Sign* [*Znak promienisty*]).

While, during the painting *plein-air*, the Białowieża Forest and its unique landscape and ecosystem served primarily as a source of inspiration – responding to the needs of postwar Modern art and yielding to the artists’ visual imagination – at the sculpture meetings, it was transformed into a material resource for wooden sculpture. During communism, forests, much like other natural resources, became integral to the country’s modernisation, while their management was part of the general process of social and economic engineering, with their principal goal of economic development and socialist progress. As Agata Agnieszka Konczal argues, in the decades after the end of the Second World War, when Polish borders shifted significantly, forestry played an important role in centrally controlled economic planning (Konczal, 2017: 260). Modern forestry, implemented in state-controlled, nationalised forests, was a form of “forest farming”, whose objective was to organise the woodland areas and introduce efficient wood production methods. The forest was then reduced to a purely utilitarian function: a resource of timber.

The postwar era saw a historic increase in Poland’s woodland areas from 20.8% to 27.6% (Broda, Żabko-Potopowicz, 1985: 30). The surface area covered by trees increased, but so did the amount of wood annually procured from state-owned forests. Socialist forestry was very much like centrally planned agriculture. Nature, just like society, was to become productive according to specified norms and limits. This approach is fully manifested in a 1958 film *Życie wróciło w Bieszczady* [*Life is Back in Bieszczady*], which documents the organisation of forestry in Bieszczady mountain region in the south-east of Poland, a region incorporated into Polish territory after the war. The narrator explains that the thick forest stretches far and wide, like in some exotic country. This colonial metaphor, introduced one minute into the film, quickly leads him to recognise the true value of the forest: “16 million cubic metres of wood lie there in the forest, millions of dollars, a priceless export resource” (*Życie wróciło w Bieszczady*, 1958). Socialist forestry, modelled on its colonial predecessor, perpetuated the idea of forestry as wood farming, whose main goal was the transformation of the landscape. The first step was the removal of the original layer of the forest to introduce instead the forest “proper” – usually of the same species of fast-growing trees (Konczal, 2017: 291).

In communist Poland, the disciplined space of the forest helped propagate socialist order and worked as a visual materialisation of the state, much like agriculture (Konczal,

2017: 260). The process of ordering the forest was particularly intensified in the areas that were not formerly within the Polish borders, and these efforts paralleled those of organisers of artistic life in the Polish provinces. Both were carefully planned, mapped, and translated into charts, tables, and numbers. In the new communist economy, nature (but also art) was to be functional and productive, with norms and limits specifying both the ideological as well as material benefits for the society (Konczal, 2017: 277).

Admittedly, during Socialism, the Białowieża Forest enjoyed a special status. Established as a nature reserve in the interwar period, the area of the forest was officially listed as the Białowieża National Park in 1947, with more than half of its 10.5 thousand hectares under strict protection. However, when the principles of Polish forestry during communism are juxtaposed with the premises behind the organisation of the two *plein-air* events in Białowieża, it becomes apparent how the state-formulated definition of nature informed art production and organisation of artistic life. The treatment of nature as a material and ideological resource finds its unexpected equivalent in the programming of the two discussed *plein-air* events. In the case of the sculpture meetings in Hajnówka, the Białowieża Forest worked as a source of artistic material (wood), while its local history and folklore as a source of inspiration. Similarly, the painting festivals utilised the unique setting to attract painters and this way develop artistic life in the Białystok region. However, the forest itself, while unique, was made to conform to the strict confines of Modernist artistic imagination.

Artistic research in the post-Socialist forest

After the political transition of 1989, the state's approach to forestry changed significantly, reflecting the new democratic and capitalist realities. The resource model was replaced by the new sustainable forestry, as defined by the *Forest Bill [Ustawa o lasach]*. As Konczal summarises, within the framework of the new policy, the forest has multiple functions: economic, environmental (ecological), and social (Konczal, 2017: 294). However, during the decades after 1989, this new sustainable model of the multifunctional forest was often used to obscure the actual persistence of the resource model, as demonstrated by the fact that the ecological function of the forest was reduced to its role as a currency in trading CO₂ emissions (Konczal, 2017: 327). In the early 2000s, attempts were made to reformulate forestry and forest-related policies, particularly during the long-term debates organised to develop the National Forest Programme [Narodowy Program Leśny] in 2013–2015, a programme projected to reflect international forest policy, as defined by Agenda 21 and Forest Principles (*Forest Principles – Report...*, 1992). Konczal interprets this attempt in terms of a “hybrid forum”, a platform for the confrontation of expert and lay knowledge of various social actors (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, 2011). By necessity, Konczal explains, this forum engages non-human actors as well: trees, soil, animals, plants, climate, and carbon dioxide (Konczal, 2017: 345). Ultimately, due to the political changes in Poland in 2015, the Programme's implementation was problematic, with the state-run National Forests company reintroducing the resource-based model of forestry, and ultimately culminated in the formulation of recommendations. Their authors postulate, among other things,

that selecting “one conception of nature and one type of human relationship to nature should be avoided” (Konczal, 2017: 391).

However, the discussion of what the forest is or what it should be was further complicated in 2016, when intense logging in the Białowieża Forest became a matter of heated public debate. The differing attitudes to whether the forest should be “healed” by logging to prevent the spreading of the European spruce bark beetle, or allowed to mend by itself, revealed the underlying opposing conceptions of nature. The former, manifested by the state and the foresters, postulated that nature should be protected because it is valuable, yet only so as a resource in capitalist economy. Justyna Tabaszewska argues that seen from this perspective, the forest is a “space that cumulates trees”, a “container for trees”, so that this container would be ruined “if trees were to be replaced by grass for some period” (Tabaszewska, 2019: 105). The latter, also based on a premise that the natural and human worlds are radically separate, sought to maintain this separation and advocated passive protection of the forest, yet only if it met the scientific criteria of “virgin forest” (Konczal, 2016: 257). Both attitudes meant that nature was translated into numeric values (economic and scientific data), which are inherently the same (both human) categories (Konczal, 2016: 264).

The polysemic nature of the forest, along with its different definitions in national, scientific, and cultural discourses, requires a perspective that considers their often conflicting viewpoints. This was the assumption of the initiators of the project *Returning to Białowieża [Wracając do Białowieży]*, inspired by the tradition of painting *plein-air*s in Białowieża. The curators (Tomasz Koszewnik and Jan Szewczyk) collaborated with Professor Marek Wasilewski and the participants of the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Studies at the University of Arts in Poznań¹. The meeting sought to reconsider the Socialist format of the *plein-air* and reformulated it in accordance with the idea of contemporary artistic research projects. Its key aspect was therefore not so much providing a platform for the artist’s contact with nature, but collaborating with local institutions and communities: Jan Józef Lipski Common University in Teremiski, scientists, naturalists, foresters, and artists. Szewczyk, co-curator of the project, explained that while the traditional *plein-air* format generates subjective and random images, the project’s main objective was to develop a broader perspective: “We gave up the traditional format of painting pictures and decided to organise meetings, small symposia that allowed us to get to know Białowieża” (Szewczyk, 2019). As a consequence, the idea was to redefine the traditional *plein-air* and pursue anthropologically oriented artistic and scientific research, which stemmed from the changes in the methods of educating doctoral students at art academies (Szewczyk, 2019).

The exhibition *Returning to Białowieża* (Arsenal Gallery, Białystok, May 13–23, 2016, curators: Koszewnik, Szewczyk) offered a summary of the *plein-air* meeting of artists organised in October 2015 and in its form also re-defined the traditional

¹ Artists: Przemek Branas, Jakub Czyszczon, Michał Grochowiak, Justyna Górowska, Karolina Kubik, Marek Kucharski, Diana Lelonek, Piotr Macha, Paweł Matyszewski, Dawid Misiorny, Zofia Nierodzińska, Patrycja Orzechowska, Paulina Pankiewicz, Mateusz Sadowski, Łukasz Sosiński, Magdalena Starska.

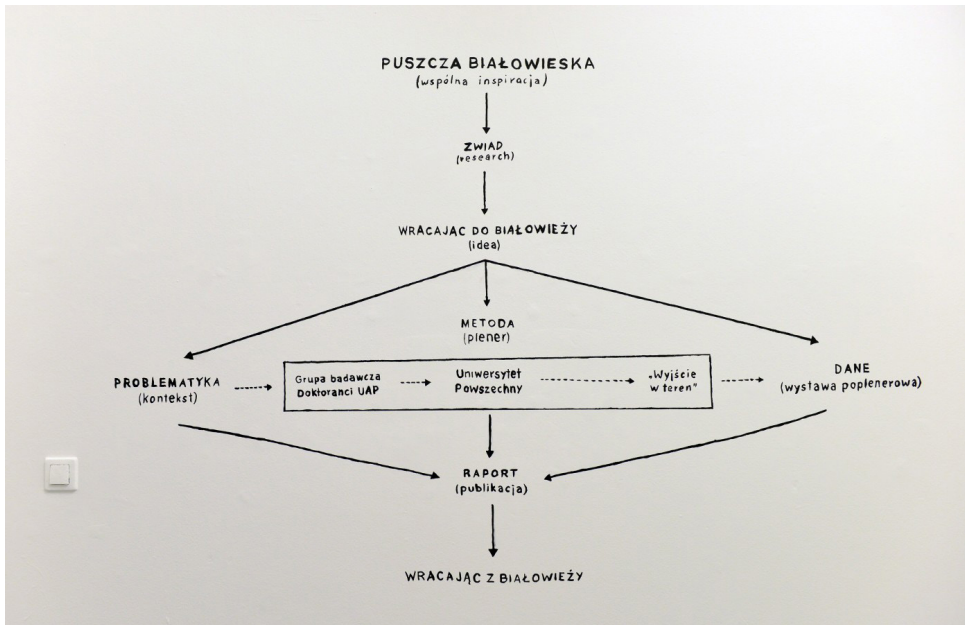


Fig. 2. *Wracając z Białowieży*, exhibition opening, Zachęta Project Room, Photo: M. Krzyżanek. Creative Commons CC BY-SA

post-*plein-air* exhibition, which, in the communist era, was composed of works that varied both thematically as well as stylistically and shared only the medium itself: painting. The exhibition at Arsenal Gallery featured a polyphonic set of artistic experiments in media such as drawing, mind maps, installation, landscape photography, food art, and found objects. Diana Lelonek showed small aquarium-size vitrines with industrially-produced objects that became habitats for plants (“trash-plants”), while Justyna Górowska served jellies made of wild plants found in meadows near the Białowieża Forest.

A follow-up to this show was an exhibition at the project room of Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, titled *Returning from Białowieża* [*Wracając z Białowieży*] (Zachęta Project Room, January 22 – February 5, 2017), which featured works by Szewczyk and Koszewnik, with guest performance of field recordings by Peter Cusack and Martyna Poznańska, *Synapses of Białowieża* [*Synapsy Białowieży*], recorded in 2016 in the forest. The exhibition presented the results of the project participants’ work, varied in terms of the selection of media and methods of communicating research outcomes, illustrating how the adoption of a scientific and artistic perspective rather than a *strictly* artistic one allowed not only to develop a critical view of the *plein-air* format but also to reflect on the forest as a cultural phenomenon. The exhibition featured an enlarged illustration of the bark beetle from Tomasz Samojlik’s book *The Dead Forest* [*Umarty las*] next to a model of a section of a forest, a traditional pencil drawing of a bison’s head, as well as a sketch (mind map) of the entire project, from the initial idea through participating actors to research outcomes. This way, the exhibition confronted the subjective



Fig. 3., 4. *Wracając z Białowieży*, exhibition opening, Zachęta Project Room, Photo: M. Krzyżanek. Creative Commons CC BY-SA

artistic perception of the forest with its description in the scientific discourse, but also juxtaposed the perspective of ecologists and foresters in one space. The multiplication of perspectives allowed the exhibition to emphasise their diversity and visual incompatibility, and at the same time to raise important questions about the role of visibility (and visual culture) in the development of specific ways of seeing the Białowieża Forest.

The exhibition, with its polyphonic portrayal of the Białowieża Forest, illustrates how these (often contradictory) multiple narratives – artistic, scientific, pop cultural, and touristic – ultimately constructed a selected fragment of the natural environment as exceptional, unique, and valuable. It is a national symbol, important for Polish history, and also a part of global heritage, officially listed by the UN as World Heritage and by the EU as part of its network of nature protection areas. In scientific terms, it is valued as one of the few remaining primeval forests. As an epitome of wilderness and primordality, Białowieża evokes a temporality that defies the linear order of culture, making it particularly susceptible to modern culture's practice of "othering". Writing about the thick virgin forest [puszcza] as a literary motif, Aleksandra Uberowska points out that, next to a botanical garden, a swamp, a beach, and wilderness, the virgin forest belongs to

[...] a special corpus of ecocritical motifs-discourses, which are linked both by the status of a "remnant", a prehistoric relic, i.e. the "Other" of modernist narrative, as well as by

[...] liminality, ability to connect and remove the boundaries between nature-culture, country-city, artefact and ecofact (Ubertowska, 2017: 194).

Conclusion

Writing an environmental history of Polish postwar art is a task that requires acknowledgement of numerous obstacles, both methodological and fact-related. Firstly, there is the problem of the lack of knowledge about the state of the natural environment during Socialism. As Maja Fowkes emphasised, in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, the flow of information about the state of the environment was blocked (Fowkes, 2015: 11–12). Secondly, the environmental history of the postwar era prioritises Soviet environmentalism as a subject of scholarship, with considerably fewer studies dedicated to the diverse histories of other, non-Soviet states (such as the Polish People's Republic). Moreover, because of this Soviet focus, there exists a simplified picture of this complex history. Anna Barcz attributes this to the dominance of Western scholars in the field of environmental history as a discipline (Barcz, 2022: 19). Their English-language studies of Soviet environmental catastrophe enjoy an understandably wider readership than any works in Eastern European languages.

However, in recent years, a growing number of scholars have addressed issues related to the environment and environmental history in their studies (e.g. Jarosz, 2017). There seems to be a shared understanding of the need to confront a common perception of the Soviet era as a series of environmental catastrophes (Barcz, 2022: 19–20). On the other hand, with environmental history framed by notions such as the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, there is a question of whether their West-centric perspective leaves room for non-Western narratives. In view of this, Maja and Reuben Fowkes propose "Socialist Anthropocene" as a term that helps us think about the specific way Socialism as a political system and ideology shaped people's approach to and treatment of the natural environment (Fowkes, Fowkes, 2021: 230).

In this text, I attempted to demonstrate that writing about environmentally engaged contemporary art needs to consider the specific post-Socialist condition of "nature". In Poland, as well as in other Eastern Bloc states, both the material organisation of the natural environment, as well as the construction of "nature" as an abstract idea, on many levels still perpetuates older Socialist models. This, at least partly, explains the clash between the premises of the global environmental movement, environmental humanities as an academic discipline, as well as environmentally engaged art, on the one hand, and the actual policies of environmental management as they are implemented by the state and its institutions, on the other. Admittedly, this clash is equally dramatic in the West, where environmental history, activism, and the arts consistently trace and condemn the destructive effects of capitalism on the environment. However, it has been increasingly clear to those writing environmental art histories in this part of Europe that their proper understanding requires a different set of tools and a more locally embedded theoretical framing. In this text, I argued that the Socialist and post-Socialist definitions of the forest and its functions differ, which reflects the changing model of forestry and the shift towards sustainable forestry after 1989. However, the conflict

around the logging of the Białowieża Forest in 2016 revealed the underlying persistence of the resource-oriented model of forestry. Considering that all Polish forests are still national property, managed by the state-owned National Forest Company, this model can be understood as post-Socialist rather than an echo of extractivist capitalism.

Bibliography

- Barcz, A. (2017). Drzewa i zakorzenienie polskości. *Czas Kultury*, 3 (194): 32–39.
- Barcz, A. (2022). *Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe: Literature, History and Memory*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Braddock, A. C. (2015). From Nature to Ecology: The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History. In J. Davis, J. A. Greenhill, J. D. LaFountain (eds.). *A Companion to American Art*, 447–468. Chichester: Wiley.
- Broda, J., Żabko-Potopowicz, A. (1985). Ewolucja leśnictwa w Polsce. In K. Czarny (ed.). *W głąb lasu. Las w polskiej literaturze i sztuce*, 9–31. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Sport i Turystyka”.
- Callon, M., Lascoumes, P., Barthe, Y. (2011). *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, translated by G. Burchell. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Forest Principles – Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (1992). <https://www.wrm.org.uy/other-information/forest-principles-report-of-the-united-nations-conference-on-environment-and-development>. (Retrieved: 27.05.2024).
- Fowkes, M. (2015). *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*. Budapest – New York: Central European University Press.
- Fowkes, M., Fowkes, R. (2021). W pełnym słońcu. Socjalistyczny antropocen w dramatycznej odsonie. In J. Bazin, J. Kordjak (eds.). *Zimna rewolucja. Społeczeństwa Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej wobec socrealizmu, 1948–1959*, 228–233. Warszawa: Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, Instytut Adama Mickiewicza.
- Jarosz, D. (2017). Modernisation through Contamination. Degradation of the Natural Environment in Poland (1945–1970) as Perceived by the Authorities and the Society. *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 115: 6–35.
- Konczal, A. A. (2016). Korniki, świerki, leśnicy i ekolodzy. Spór o Puszcę Białowieską jako konflikt odmiennych wizji natury. *Lud*, 100: 257–265.
- Konczal, A. A. (2017). *Antropologia lasu. Leśnicy a percepcja i kształtowanie wizerunków przyrody w Polsce*. Warszawa: IBL PAN.
- Kowska, B. (2003). Światło. *Exit*, 53–56: 3200–3202.
- Markowska, A. (2012). *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Patrizio, A. (2019). *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Prokopowicz-Lipniecka, H. (1974). *W obronie obrazu*. In *IX spotkania malarskie, II Międzynarodowy Plener Białowieża 1973*. Białystok: BWA Białystok.
- Rydiger, M. (2018, 27 July). *Moc natury. Henry Moore w Polsce*, kuratorki: Eulalia Domanowska, Hannah Higham, Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej w Orońsku, 21 kwietnia–9 września 2018. *ownetic magazine*. <https://ownetic.com/magazyn/2018/henry-moore-wielki-powrot-centrum-rzezby-polskiej-oronsko>. (Retrieved: 27.05.2024).

- Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and Memory*. London: HarperCollins.
- Sowińska, T. (1971). *Białowieża 71. VII Ogólnopolski Plener Malarski* [Exhibition catalogue]. Białystok: Muzeum Okręgowe w Białymstoku, ZPAP, BWA.
- Stano, B. (2017). Plenery pod skrzydłami Wielkiego Przemysłu: mity i próby ich wskrzeszenia. In A. Kisielewska, A. Kisielewski, M. Kostaszuk-Romanowska (eds). *PRL-owskie re-sentymenty*, 215–236. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra.
- Stano, B. (2018). Inwazja malarzy i rzeźbiarzy na Białostoczczyznę. Wątki regionalne w centralnie planowanej akcji plenerowej okresu PRL-u i ich współczesne kontynuacje. In L. Lameński, E. Błotnicka-Mazur, M. Pastwa (eds.). *Sztuka pograniczy. Studia z historii sztuki*, 433–454. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.
- Stano, B. (2019). *Artysta w fabryce. Dwa oblicza mecenatu przemysłowego w PRL*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego.
- Szewczyk, J. (2019). *Puszcza Białowieża jest dla mieszkańców Podlasia tym, czym góra Fuji dla Japończyków* [radio programme]. Radio dla Ciebie, 21 January 2019 [online]. <https://www.rdc.-pl/informacje/puszcza-bialowieska-jest-dla-mieszkanow-podlasia-tym-czym-gora-fuji-dla-japonczykow-posluchaj>. (Retrieved: 29.04.2019).
- Tabaszewska, J. (2019). Spór o naturę puszczy. In P. Czaplinski, J. B. Bednarek, D. Gostyński (eds.). *O jeden las za daleko. Demokracja, kapitalizm i nieposłuszeństwo ekologiczne w Polsce*, 103–112. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa.
- Ubertowska, A. (2017). Pisanie puszczy. Ekonomie dyskursu ekokrytycznego i postkolonialnego. *Teksty Drugie*, 6: 193–208.
- Wołkowycki, M. (1976). *XII Plener Białowieży, Założenia – ideowo programowe*. Białystok: Zarząd Okręgu ZPAP w Białymstoku.
- Życie wróciło w Bieszczady* [film] (1958). A. Minorski (director). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCEW0vRvqQ>. (Retrieved: 27.05.2024).

Making art in the Białowieża Forest: from late avant-garde *plein-air* to artistic field research

Abstract:

This text examines the cultural (visual) constructions of the Białowieża Forest and their transformations from the mid-20th to the early 21st century. To do so, selected art events in Białowieża are analysed, with a focus on cyclical events organised during the peak of the Polish *plein-air* art festival movement (Ogólnopolski Plener Białowieży, Białowieża 1965–1983) and a 2016 artistic field research project *Wracając do Białowieży* [*Returning to Białowieża*], organised and curated by Tomasz Koszewnik and Jan Szewczyk. The comparison of the tenets and ideological foundations of the events illustrates the changes that occurred in the understanding of the idea of 'situatedness' or site-specificity of art produced in the natural environment or in direct response to it. Moreover, it allows for a discussion of the relationship between artistic ideas of working in nature and the construction of nature (or parts thereof) as both an ideological concept and a broadly understood resource (a source of material, inspiration, knowledge, etc.).

Keywords: Białowieża forest, *plein-air*, artistic research, environmental art history

Tworzenie sztuki w Puszczy Białowieskiej: od późno-awangardowych plenerów do artystycznych badań terenowych

Abstrakt:

W tekście podjęto analizę kulturowych (wizualnych) konstrukcji Puszczy Białowieskiej i ich przemian od połowy XX do początku XXI w. na przykładzie wydarzeń artystycznych organizowanych w tym okresie w Białowieży. Rozważania skupiają się na festiwalach odbywających się w okresie największego rozwoju ruchu plenerowego (Ogólnopolski Plener Białowieski, Białowieża 1965–1983) oraz na zorganizowanym w 2016 r. projekcie badawczo-artystycznym *Wracając do Białowieży*, kuratorowanym przez Tomasza Koszewnika i Jana Szewczyka. Porównanie założeń i podstaw ideologicznych wybranych wydarzeń służy analizie przemian w pojmowaniu relacji sztuki wobec miejsca, w którym powstaje. Jest także punktem wyjścia do rozważań nad relacją między artystycznymi koncepcjami pracy w naturze (w plenerze) a traktowaniem natury (lub jej fragmentów) jako szeroko rozumianego zasobu – źródła inspiracji, wiedzy i materialnego bogactwa.

Słowa kluczowe: Puszcza Białowieska, plener, badania artystyczne, środowiskowa historia sztuki

Karolina Kolenda – art historian and literary scholar, educated at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. Assistant professor at the Institute of Art and Design, University of National Education Commission in Krakow. Author of *Na (nie) swojej ziemi. Tożsamość kulturowa i sztuka w Wielkiej Brytanii po 1945* (2016) and *Englishness Revisited: Contemporary Literary Representations of English National and Cultural Identity* (2019), as well as co-editor of *An Inverted World: Reconfigurations of Spaces of Memory in Krakow's Kazimierz* (2021). Among her current research interests are environmental art history, landscape studies, and cultural geography.