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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Scientific discipline:

fine art and art conservation

Title of the doctoral dissertation:

Art in the Anthropocene: From Theory to Change-Making Practice

Doctoral dissertation abstract:

The doctoral dissertation entitled "*Art in the Anthropocene: From Theory to Change-Making Practice*" focuses on the question of the significance of art in the context of the challenges of the Anthropocene. The starting point is the assumption that addressing the environmental crisis is not solely a scientific or technical matter but above all a cultural challenge related to a crisis of imagination. It concerns the ability to create narratives and visions of the future that may support social and ecological transformation. From this perspective, contemporary art is considered a space for formulating alternative images of the future and for testing models of social action. The dissertation consists of two complementary and equally important parts – theoretical and artistic. The theoretical part provides a critical analysis of the issue, while the artistic part takes the form of a conceptual project presented as a handbook, developed as a response to the gap identified in the theoretical analysis. This dual structure, combining scholarly reflection with creative experimentation, makes it possible to indicate potential directions for the development of art in the Anthropocene.

The theoretical part offers a critical examination of transformations in artistic strategies addressing environmental issues, grounded in the framework of contemporary ecocriticism. It traces the development of tendencies from pioneering ecological art of the 1960s, through socially engaged practices at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, to contemporary approaches that blur the boundary between art and social reality. Particular emphasis is placed on strategies that, in recent decades, have shifted from representing problems to participatory actions carried out in



collaboration with communities and non-human actors. Key narratives and metaphors identified in artistic practices include catastrophic visions and interspecies stories, which not only comment on the Anthropocene crisis but also influence how it is understood. The evaluation of these approaches revealed both examples that initiate critical reflection and collective action, and cases where art is reduced to an impressive but superficial gesture. The analysis was further developed with reference to practices extending beyond the traditional frameworks of art, aimed at deeper anchoring in social reality. An important field of verification was a case study in Opolno-Zdrój, which allowed theoretical insights to be confronted with concrete artistic and social experiences. This made it possible to capture both the potential of art to integrate communities and highlight environmental issues, as well as the barriers that limit its long-term impact. As a result, a gap was identified – the absence of a model that would consistently translate artistic interventions into lasting change – which became the point of departure for the artistic part of the dissertation.

The artistic part constitutes an independent component of the doctorate – an original project entitled “*Współczynnik Użytkowania*” (Usage Coefficient, WU). It is the outcome of the theoretical reflection but at the same time a practical tool applicable regardless of familiarity with the dissertation. The project was conceived as a framework to support the planning, implementation, and maintenance of socially engaged art initiatives, in order to increase their real and long-term impact. It takes the form of a handbook that structures the creative process from the formulation of a project, through the stage of its use by participants (treated as active users rather than passive viewers), to the long-term maintenance of the outcomes. This cycle assists artists and communities in making informed decisions regarding continuation, modification, conclusion, or transfer of results to local stakeholders. WU thus fills the gap between a one-time symbolic artistic gesture and durable social change, emphasizing long-term collaboration with participants. The concept draws on the ideas of useful art and Stephen Wright’s notion of usership, shifting the role of the audience from passive observer to active user. It also refers to the tradition of social sculpture by Joseph Beuys and Jerzy Ludwiński’s postartistic vision, both of which blur the boundary between art and everyday life. Furthermore, WU integrates a posthumanist perspective by including elements of the natural environment as co-participants, and is inspired by postgrowth concepts that stress the necessity of operating within planetary boundaries and the principle of “do no harm.” With such a broad theoretical foundation, the project remains rooted in the discourse of art while offering a tool for designing and evaluating the effectiveness of artistic interventions. The combination of theoretical analysis with artistic experimentation indicates that art can contribute to processes of social change in the Anthropocene, provided it transcends traditional frameworks and retains a critical awareness of its own limitations. The dissertation thus underscores the importance of an integrated approach that links imagination with practice, enabling art to participate meaningfully in addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene and in co-creating a more sustainable future.

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