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The Grass is Greener: Władysław Hasiór in an Ecocritical Perspective

Abstract

The text offers an analysis of selected works by Władysław Hasiór from an ecocritical perspective. The focus is placed on Hasiór's best-known work, *The Organ*, as well as on several parts of his *Photo Notebook*. The analysis seeks to demonstrate that an application of an ecocritical perspective to the reading of Hasiór's work may help fill in the blanks in the environmental history of art in Poland. Several recent publications and exhibitions that concern the relationship between art and nature focus on uncovering the "prehistory" of ecological art in Poland or the local tradition of Land Art. The text is meant as a preliminary study of possible research perspectives that the proposed reading may open up, as well as a consideration of whether ecocriticism could serve as an opportunity to bring the tenets of horizontal art history into the practice of rereading the work of Polish artists and their relationship with the landscape.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Hasiór, horizontal art history, Polish neo-avant-garde, environmental art history

In recent years we have observed a significant development of ecologically-oriented art in Poland. Understandably, this process has its source in the rise of the awareness of urgent global ecological problems, such as climate change and accelerated pace of extinction of numerous species, and their immediate impact on Europe and Poland. However, this growing interest of artists in the relationship between humans and nature can also be attributed to the general turn within the humanities towards the study of the natural environment, which has been embraced by Polish scholars as well, who make significant contributions in areas such as environmental history,

ecocriticism, animal studies, and posthumanism.¹ However, Polish environmentally-oriented art², featured in numerous exhibitions over the last decade, inspires critical debates that reach further than our immediate artistic and ecological reality, stimulating art critics and historians to consider the “prehistory” of ecological art in Poland, in other words, to revisit existing art histories in search of works and artists that can change the way we perceive the relationship between art and nature.³

The growing presence of art production and scholarship focused on nature and environment provides a favourable climate for looking back at the classics of the Polish avant-garde and neo-avant-garde through the lens of categories afforded by ecocriticism. One of such artists, whose work has recently enjoyed a renewed critical interest, is Władysław Hasior. Several exhibitions, conferences, publications, and research projects that addressed his output highlighted numerous gaps in the study of his work and identified potential research perspectives that had not been previously pursued. In this paper, I will argue that numerous aspects of Hasior’s engagement with and relationship towards nature and environment have not been sufficiently examined; neither had there been made an effort to provide a comprehensive analysis of his work from an ecocritical perspective.⁴ In what follows I will attempt to partly fill this gap. I will start by providing an outline of recent scholarship on ecologically-oriented art in Poland in the 1960s and ‘70s to identify how our present perspective on and knowledge of the political conditions during communism can help explain the context in which artists undertook art projects that either

1 Among numerous recent publications there are also several notable texts that concern visual arts, see for example: M. Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje: sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu*, Poznań, 2010; G. Klamann, ed., *Biowładza i bioaktywizm: sztuka w dobie posthumanizmu / Biopower and Bioactivism: Art in the Age of Posthumanism*, Gdańsk, 2015; J. Małczyński, *Krajobrazy Zagłady: Perspektywa historii środowiskowej*, Warsaw, 2018; A. Ubertowska, D. Korczyńska-Partyka, E. Kuliś, eds., *Poetyki ekocydu: Historia, natura, konflikt*, Warsaw, 2019; *Teksty Drugie*, 2018, no. 2.

2 I refer to works and artists who display a diverse degree of engagement with ecology and articulate their standpoints through a variety of media; within this group are ecological activists such as Cecylia Malik, artists who envision possible future ecosystems, such as Diana Lelonek and Magdalena Lazar, ecofeminist works by Małgorzata Markiewicz and Żubrzyce collective, but also a large group of artists who occasionally touch upon the subject matter related to the natural environment.

3 Among significant recent publications that display such ambitions are: M. Worłowska, “Ecologically Oriented Land Art in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s”, in: A. Markowska, ed., *Sustainable Art: Facing the Need for Regeneration, Responsibility and Relations*, Warsaw–Toruń, 2015, pp. 35–41; A. M. Leśniewska, *Nowe miejsce rzeźby w sztuce polskiej lat 60. XX wieku jako wyraz przemian w sztuce przestrzeni*, Warsaw, 2015.

4 Although ecocriticism is a complex trend in the humanities, with its many definitions highlighting multiple aspects of this practice of reading cultural texts, for arguments presented here I focus on the definition by Greg Garrard, who suggests that “the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself.” See: G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, London and New York, 2012, p. 5. For other definitions of the term and the discussion of the development of ecocriticism as a field see: J. Tabaszewska, “Ekokrytyczna (samo)świadomość”, *Teksty Drugie*, 2018, no. 2, pp. 7–16.

addressed or were located in the natural environment. I will then examine selected works by Hasior to investigate whether his own engagement with nature displays a shared vision or rather testifies to his singular position within the Polish art world. In other words, my goal will not be to suggest that Hasior's art displays ecological awareness or ambitions, akin in any sense to many neo-avant-garde works in Poland that have recently been scrutinised in this context,⁵ but instead to investigate his *oeuvre* as a part of environmental history of Polish art and through the lens of ecocriticism, the goal of which is to "articulate nature" in cultural texts in order to, as Aleksandra Ubertowska aptly summarised it, "semantically explore the area that seems to us a raw, irreducible outside of culture".⁶

In post-war Poland, much like in other countries of the Eastern Bloc, the access to information about the state of the natural environment was very limited.⁷ In *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (2015), Maja Fowkes refers to historical analyses that identify the popular social dissatisfaction with the living conditions offered by the degraded environment as one of the main causes of the decline and ultimate fall of communism.⁸ At the same time, she emphasises that, in East-Central Europe, art that expressed a concern with the natural environment remained outside the scope of interest of art criticism throughout the 1960s and '70s.⁹ Moreover, in her view, there have not been many changes in this respect in the recent scholarship of neo-avant-garde art, which remains focused on other issues and problems.¹⁰ Consequently, Fowkes's book seeks to make up for this significant omission. However, as much as it provides a general overview of the political conditions in which artists made art that focused on the natural environment, none of its several chapters is dedicated to art made in Poland.¹¹ Meanwhile, in Poland,

5 See: M. Worłowska, "Land art – poszukiwanie nowych przestrzeni dla sztuki", in: S. Jasionowicz, ed., *Obrazy świata, przestrzenie dzieła: Literatura–sztuki plastyczne*, Krakow, 2016, pp. 15–30; and a recent exhibition *Kląska urodzaju: Początki sztuki ekologicznie zaangażowanej w Polsce*, Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej w Opolu, 18.05–23.06.2019. See also: Sue Spaid, *Ecovention Europe, Art to Transform Ecologies, 1957–2017*, ex. cat., Museum De Domijnen – Hedendaagse Kunst, Sittard, 2017, where Polish ecologically-oriented art of the last sixty years is located within a larger European context.

6 A. Ubertowska, "Mówić w imieniu biotycznej wspólnoty". Anatomie i teorie tekstu środowiskowego / ekologicznego", *Teksty Drugie*, 2018, no. 2, pp. 17–40.

7 M. Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Budapest–New York, 2015, p. 4. Fowkes suggests that it was not until the 1980s when information about the state of the natural environment has become accessible to the public. However, this access was also provided involuntarily, as manifested by the events in Czechoslovakia, where data was "leaked" to the public in 1983. See: Fowkes, *The Green Bloc*, pp. 10–12.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

11 Fowkes partly filled this gap with her and Reuben Fowkes's publication on Natalia LL, published a year later. See: M. and R. Fowkes, "I Live on Earth: Cosmic Realms and the Place of Nature in the Work of Natalia LL", in: A. Jakubowska, ed., *Natalia LL: Beyond Consumer Art*, Warsaw, 2017, pp. 105–127.

art that focused on nature and critically addressed its earlier treatment in terms of a source of aesthetic pleasure and/or a resource emerged in the 1960s, displaying either formal affinities to Land Art or aspiring to merge ecological activism with artistic practice.

Among the works that expressed ambitions of raising ecological awareness is Liliana Lewicka's *Place for Reflection* (Miejsce do rozmyślań, 1966), made on the occasion of the 1st Symposium of Artists and Scientists in Puławy. As a part of her work, Lewicka outlined a fragment of a clearing in the forest where she installed a structure made of two intersecting platforms, on which she placed decaying heads of animals she acquired from a local butcher's. Men dressed in white laboratory overalls rode on motorcycles following the paths that surrounded the clearing. As Anna Maria Leśniewska suggests, in this way, those "riders of chemical services" demarcated "a zone of contamination, whose limits were set by the sound, as well as by smell".¹² Similarly concerned about nature were also the works by Bronisław Kierzkowski and Joe Oda. As Leśniewska argues, despite the openly "technocratic" standpoint of the Symposium, at least several of the artists featured in the event marked their presence as advocates of nature rather than technology and practised through their work what she refers to as the "ecology of art".¹³

Artists of the Polish neo-avant-garde, who addressed environmental issues, did not pay much attention to leaving permanent traces of their interventions, while most of their works were produced for open-air events and art festivals that defined the rhythm and direction of the development of art in communist Poland. Besides the Symposium, among other events that were significant from the point of view of environmental art history in Poland are Wrocław '70 Symposium (where Jerzy Beres presented his concept for the *Living Arena Monument* (Żywy pomnik Arena, 1971)), the Ziemia Zgorzelecka Open Air Festival in Opolno-Zdrój, which took place in July 1971 under the slogan: "science and art in the process of protection of the natural environment", as well as the 7th Złote Grono Symposium in Zielona Góra in 1975, where Stefan Papp engaged in ecological activism by producing and distributing posters that informed the citizens about *Trees Dying in Public Space* (Drzewa umierają publicznie, 1975).¹⁴ His obituary-imitating posters were quickly removed by the *milicja*, highlighting the deeply political dimension of ecologically involved art in communist Poland.¹⁵

12 A. M. Leśniewska, *Nowe miejsce rzeźby w sztuce polskiej lat 60. XX wieku jako wyraz przemian w sztuce przestrzeni*, Warsaw, 2015, p. 184.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

14 More on Polish ecologically oriented Land Art made during symposia and open-air festivals in the 1960s and '70s in: M. Worłowska, "Ecologically Oriented Land Art in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s", in: A. Markowska, ed., *Sustainable Art: Facing the Need for Regeneration, Responsibility and Relations*, Warsaw-Toruń, 2015, pp. 35–41.

15 The decision made by some artists working during the communism to locate their work outside the urban context was often interpreted as a way to avoid censorship, that is, as a search for space of greater artistic freedom, rather than an interest in nature, its condition or its status. According to Joanna Filipczyk, one of the few Polish artists for whom the natural environ-

Due to the more focused attention that the state apparatus paid to artistic practice during large art festivals, particularly those taking place in urban space, the artists' choice to locate their work outside the city was often dictated by the need for greater artistic freedom. However, paradoxically perhaps, it was the urban context that often offered the conditions in which the ecological tone of the work could resound most distinctly.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in Poland, art events whose singular goal was to offer conditions where artists could engage with nature were organised in keeping with the traditional formula of the *plein-air* festival, informed by the modernist conception of nature as a source of inspiration rather than a political issue.¹⁷

The same year that Lewicka and other artists made their statements advocating art's involvement in the issues of ecology and nature protection, Władysław Hasior was commissioned by the communist authorities to create a design for a monument celebrating those who have fallen in the Podhale region during the civil war of 1945–1947 when striving to secure the communist rule over this area. The monument, currently known as *The Organ* (Organy), was unveiled in 1966 at the Snozka Pass near Czorsztyn, where it was installed 653 meters over sea level. Understandably, in the context of the above-discussed works by Lewicka and Papp, Hasior's design has to be regarded as neither driven by the artist's concern for the degrading condition of the natural environment nor as a wish to move outside the confines of the gallery space to avoid the controlling eyes of the censors. In this respect, *The Organ* does not

ment constituted an inherent part of most of his projects was Marian Bogusz, whom she terms one of the pioneers of "sustainable art" in Poland. See: J. Filipczyk, "Searching for Social Equilibrium: Marian Bogusz's Activity as 'Prolegomena' of Sustainable Art in Poland", in: A. Markowska, ed., *Sustainable Art: Facing the Need for Regeneration, Responsibility and Relations*, Warsaw–Toruń, 2015, pp. 135–141.

16 This is apparent in the works by Bereś and Papp, but also in the classic pieces of ecological art, such as Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (1982), Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1965–1978–present), and Agnes Denes's *Wheat Field: A Confrontation* (1982). I discussed this issue in reference to American art in: K. Kolenda, "The Political (in) Landscape and Post-Occupy Art Practices", *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Arte et Educatione*, 2017, no. 12, pp. 79–91.

17 An interesting example of how deep ran the attachment to this formula is the *plein-air* painting event organised annually in Białowieża from 1965 onwards. Although orchestrated in the vicinity of Europe's last "primeval forest", the event did not seek to address its status as a cultural landmark or ecosystem of special significance but merely 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. See: B. Kowalska, "Światło", *Exit*, 2003, no. 53–56, pp. 3200–3202. Although from the present perspective, when it is difficult to think about art and its relationship with its surroundings without considering the tradition of site-specific art, the choice of Białowieża as a site for making geometrical abstraction may seem odd, during communism rural locations were favoured as conditions for making modern (also abstract) art, which turned to nature in search of basic forms, compositions, and colours, as well as more or less well defined "primeval" features. This perspective was deeply rooted in the modernist paradigm, while its model example was the artistic colony in St. Ives in Cornwall, where "wild", "prehistoric" landscape inspired landscape and marine artists, but also the abstract modernism of Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, who worked there since the late 1920s, while the heyday of the colony's international significance came in the 1950s and '60s.

seem to fit into the history of Polish environmentally-aware neo-avant-garde art. Instead, it has become an important reference point in the post-1989 debate on the legacy of monumental public sculpture made under communism.

Although Hasiór intended it as a piece commemorating all the victims of the fratricidal conflict, a granite plate, added to the monument, put a clear emphasis on the losses incurred by the communist side and read: "To the faithful sons of Poland who died in Podhale in the fight for securing the people's rule".¹⁸ In its original version, the monument consisted of a metal structure as well as a plate and figures of the fallen soldiers installed on a horizontally protruding concrete plank. Despite the undoubtedly successful formal aspect of Hasiór's work, which critics interpreted as indebted to constructivism¹⁹, the work did not succeed in becoming the world's first sound sculpture: due to either cost-cutting or faulty construction, the organs did not play.²⁰ More importantly, however, due to its status as a monument erected to praise communism and those involved in its introduction in the 1940s, after 1989, *The Organ* has come to epitomise the problems surrounding the contentious heritage of monumental public sculpture made in Poland in the postwar period.²¹ Although the debate on how to approach such works (whether to protect them or dismantle them, as some would wish) is far from over²², and the political aspect of the perception of Hasiór's work is undoubtedly of paramount importance to the critical revision of his *oeuvre*, I will be interested in how this piece can be analysed as a work that reflects the artist's ambition to produce sculptural interpretations of forms he observed in the landscape.

These forms, created either by natural forces (erosion, tectonic activity, vegetation, etc.), but also by human and non-human agents, were photographed and catalogued by Hasiór with great consistency and dedication throughout his career. A selection of this large set of photographs, which Hasiór arranged into labelled sets and used during slide show presentations he organised for the visitors to his *atelier*,

18 In 1993, Hasiór approached the authorities of Czorsztyn to remove the plate from the monument. See: K. Sienkiewicz, "Władysław Hasiór, 'Organy'", culture.pl, <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/wladyslaw-hasior-organy> [accessed 23 May 2019].

19 For an analysis of *The Organ* in reference to constructivism and neo-constructivism see for example: K. Chrudzimska-Uhera, "Obiekt w przestrzeni: Pomniki i rzeźbiarskie realizacje plenerowe Władysława Hasióra", in: M. Raińska, *Hasiór. Powrót: Granice sztuki współczesnej – wokół twórczości Władysława Hasióra*, Nowy Sącz, 2011, p. 31.

20 According to Hanna Kirchner, Hasiór's long-term friend and critic of his work, Hasiór explained that the pipes installed on the monument were of poor quality and gave only barely audible sounds; his later efforts to improve their performance failed. See: H. Kirchner, *Hasiór: Opowieść na dwa głosy*, Warsaw, 2005, pp. 51–52.

21 See a summary of the post-1989 debate surrounding *The Organ* in: K. S. Ożóg, "Zapomniane Organy, Ptaki i takie tam... Recepcja dzieł pomnikowych Hasióra po 1989 roku", in: *Hasiór. Powrót*, op. cit., pp. 34–39.

22 In 2017, the Institute of National Memory (IPN) suggested that the monument should be dismantled. See: Ł. Bobek, "Pieniny. IPN uważa, że pomnik 'Organy' Hasióra trzeba zdemontować", *Gazeta Krakowska*, 20 October 2017, <https://gazetakrakowska.pl/pieniny-ipn-uwaza-ze-pomnik-organy-hasiora-trzeba-zdemontowac/ar/12598950> [accessed 26 May 2019].

was published in *Nowa Wieś* journal, accompanied by the artist's commentary, as his *Photo Notebook*. As I will try to demonstrate, when read through the ecocritical lens, Hasiór's interest in formal arrangements found in nature is informed by the perspective that questions the division of the environment into nature and culture, and, instead, proposes to see human and non-human agents as parallel rather than opposing forces.

The collections *Rhythms* (Rytmy) and *Water Rock* (Woda Kamień) contain photographs of groups of identical or similar objects, put together either by nature (groups of trees, accumulation of rocks, flocks of sheep and birds, groups of clouds and crystals) or by humans (piled logs and wooden boards, haystacks in the field, fences, multiple elements of abstract sculptures in a gallery space, menhirs). The sets of photographs were accompanied by Hasiór's commentaries that sought to explain the reason such commonplace objects were photographed and the rationale behind putting them together (Fig. 1).²³

Notably, in his commentary to the set titled *Rhythms*, Hasiór emphasises the differences between natural and human-made rhythmical patterns: "It is very important to recognise a biological rhythm that exists in nature and distinguish it from a rhythm produced by human actions".²⁴ According to the artist, examples of biological rhythm, for instance, branches of a tree, with their irregularity, stand in contrast to "a rhythm of the built structure of a shed" in that "biological rhythm is not as insistent, not as persistently symmetrical".²⁵ However, after this distinction is highlighted, Hasiór goes on to marvel at the regularity of some natural phenomena: "A stone plate resting over a stream breaks under the pressure of temperature and the movement of the earth. It breaks in an astounding way, dividing along straight lines. Fragments that fall into the water are regular cubes".²⁶ In this text, despite the explicitly articulated conviction that biological rhythms are unlike human-made structures, the examples that Hasiór provides, the juxtapositions of photographs and their effects that he seeks to emphasise, all work to subvert rather than confirm his statement. And, indeed, the selection of his sources and their subsequent encounter on a single page of the magazine, orchestrated by the artist, speaks powerfully that the very logic behind this process is grounded in the need to highlight similarity rather than difference.

In *Photo Notebook: Rhythmic Structures* (Struktury rytmiczne), Hasiór confronts seven photographs of neatly arranged piles of wooden boards and sharpened poles

23 Significantly, Hasiór's commentaries were recorded on audio cassettes and later edited by Paweł Kwiatkowski. The edited texts retain the quality of Hasiór's spoken language, his "characteristic tempo and a dramatic flair". See: E. Tatar, "Lessons in Imagination and Sensitivity", *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór's Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Zakopane, 2017, p. 73.

24 "Notatnik Fotograficzny Władysława Hasióra (6): Rytmy", photo: Władysław Hasiór, ed. Paweł Kwiatkowski, *Nowa Wieś*, 1983, no. 41, p. 12, reprinted in: *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór's Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Zakopane, 2017, p. 42.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

26 *Ibid.*



Fig. 1. “Notatnik Fotograficzny Władysława Hasiora (6): Rytm”, commentary by Władysław Hasiór, photo: Władysław Hasiór, ed. Paweł Kwiatkowski, *Nowa Wieś*, 1983, no. 41, p. 12, reprinted in: *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór’s Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Muzeum Tatrzańskie im. Dra Tytusa Chałubińskiego w Zakopanem, Zakopane 2017, p. 42. © Muzeum Tatrzańskie im. Dra Tytusa Chałubińskiego w Zakopanem, 2017

with a picture of *The Organ*, which serves to demonstrate that, much like his assemblages made from found objects, the forms of even his most “abstract” works are derived rather than “invented” (Fig. 2). In the attendant commentary he explains:

“Rough-hewn studs, formed into a kind of horizontal stockade, are arranged so that we look at them from the front. The spikes are aimed at the viewer, demonstrating extreme aggression. I’m sorry that I can’t create a full expression of an aggressive sculpture composed of such simple means. But observing all the types of rhythms in the reality surrounding me, I decided once for a monument atypical for my artistic practice [...] deriving [...] from this arrangement of hewn stakes”.²⁷

This open declaration of fascination with the forms of what Hasiór called “plebeian art”, that is, the simple, yet “genuine”, as he saw them, products of amateur provincial artists²⁸, could be read as the artist’s reliance, in terms of the source of inspiration, on human-made structures. What is distinct in the above-cited commentary is fascination mixed with a certain humility that comes with the admission that the artist is unable to achieve the same kind of expressive power through such simple means. However, both Hasiór’s observations included in the *Photo Notebook*, as well as many of his works (from childhood experiments with roots to “sculptures torn from the ground”) suggest that he was equally eager to translate observed natural phenomena into his artistic language and that both sources were treated as forms displaying the same underlying logic, the same rationality and order.

In this process, the crucial aspect was how to convey the subtlety of observed rhythms and structures. In the eighth chapter of his *Photo Notebook*, titled “The Order of Rhythms” (“Porządek rytmów”) Hasiór included, yet again, photographs of piles of logs and pipes, bricks and stones, and one of a wooden box covered with a simple net made of string: a “nursery” for chicks (Fig. 3). At first sight, it seems that in the latter picture the net is the key element of the image, filling almost the entire composition. However, Hasiór, in his commentary, focuses on the grass amid which the box is placed: “The grass, which gives an impression of a uniform mass, has a structure and rhythm as well. This rhythm, made up of minute parts, is less distinct, less obvious than the clear rhythm of the net. But it also introduces order into the microcosm of delicate green plants”.²⁹

27 “Notatnik Fotograficzny Władysława Hasióra (7): Struktury rytmiczne”, photo: Władysław Hasiór, ed. Paweł Kwiatkowski, *Nowa Wieś*, 1983, no. 43, p. 13, reprinted in: J. Dembowska et al., eds., *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór’s Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Zakopane, 2017, p. 45 [cited after the English translation by Christopher Smith in E. Tatar, op. cit., p. 74].

28 More on Hasiór’s use of vernacular art and found objects, as well as the critical and popular reception of this aspect of his art in: H. Kirchner, “O Hasiórze – po latach / About Hasiór – After Many Years”, in: J. Chrobak, ed., *Władysław Hasiór: Europejski Rauschenberg / The European Rauschenberg*, MOCAP, Kraków, 2014, pp. 26–30.

29 “Notatnik Fotograficzny Władysława Hasióra (8): Porządek rytmu”, photo: Władysław Hasiór, ed. Paweł Kwiatkowski, *Nowa Wieś*, 1983, no. 46, p. 13, reprinted in: J. Dembowska et al., eds., *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór’s Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Zakopane, 2017, p. 47.

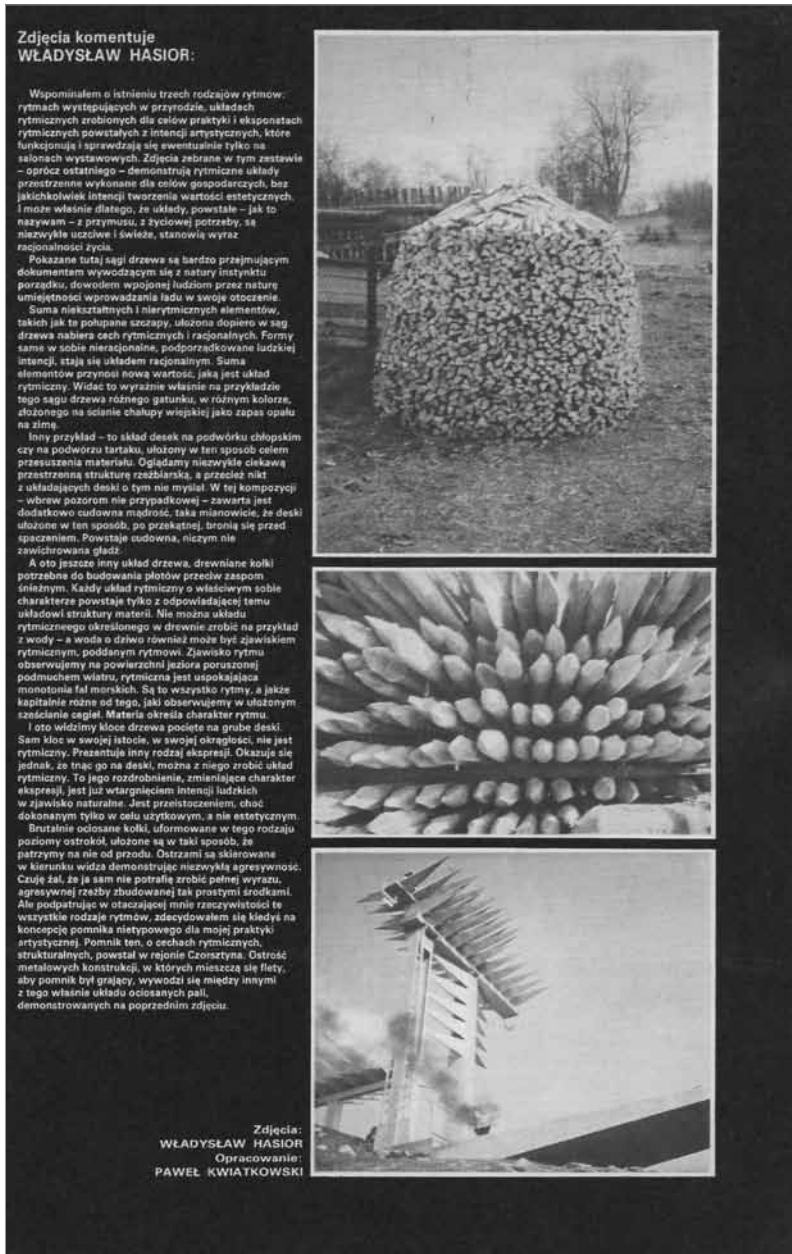


Fig. 2. “Notatnik Fotograficzny Władysława Hasiora (7): Struktury rytmiczne”, commentary by Władysław Hasiór, photo: Władysław Hasiór, ed. Paweł Kwiatkowski, *Nowa Wieś*, 1983, no. 43, p. 13, reprinted in: *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór’s Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Muzeum Tatrzańskie im. Dra Tytusa Chałubińskiego w Zakopanem, Zakopane 2017, p. 45. © Muzeum Tatrzańskie im. Dra Tytusa Chałubińskiego w Zakopanem, 2017



Fig. 3. “Notatnik Fotograficzny Władysława Hasióra (8): Porządek rytmu”, commentary by Władysław Hasiór, photo: Władysław Hasiór, ed. Paweł Kwiatkowski, *Nowa Wieś*, 1983, no. 46, p. 13, reprinted in: *Not Fot / Władysław Hasiór’s Photo Notebook*, Vol. 3: *Ziemia. Materia. Rytm / Earth. Matter. Rhythm*, Muzeum Tatrzańskie im. Dra Tytusa Chałubińskiego w Zakopanem, Zakopane 2017, p. 47. © Muzeum Tatrzańskie im. Dra Tytusa Chałubińskiego w Zakopanem, 2017

In this observation, Hasior reveals himself as an acute observer of the tiny details of the surrounding world. Ewa Tatar aptly summarised the nature of his looking at the landscape: “He cuts single elements off from reality. He grasps for detail. He gazes under the magnifying glass. [...] Individual studies are juxtaposed to display various aspects of the same phenomenon, less often to display them in a broader context”.³⁰ In this way, Hasior’s *Photo Notebook* reveals itself as a set of collected and catalogued symptoms of something larger; at close inspection, forms, structures, and rhythms are isolated from their context, while their original provenance becomes almost irrelevant. Could, then, Hasior’s way of seeing landscape be interpreted as a repeated act of separating elements from their immediate environment and, instead, locating them within the artificial (or artist-made) reality, in other words, of appropriating them for his purpose of explaining his art and its sources to the readers of *Nowa Wieś* and the audience gathered at his “artist talks”? This is not to say that Hasior’s wish to explain how his artistic imagination worked dominated over his true fascination with the simple yet marvellous forms found in nature. The question is rather whether the act of isolation of such elements and their transference into the realm of “visual motifs” can be regarded as a sign of “romantic materialism”, an act of imagination whereby objects are rendered “paradoxically transcendent” in that they exist “in two places at once”.³¹ As much as such a reading is tempting, below, I will argue against it, referring in doing so to Tatar’s comparison of Hasior’s *oeuvre* to the work of Robert Smithson.

Notably, a photograph of one of Smithson’s *Non-Site* pieces from 1968 features twice in Hasior’s collection of slides: in sets titled “Water Rock” and “Menhirs”.³² In the former, the picture of rocks in wooden boxes (signature AFDMT WH 0733 76) appears preceded by a slide combing two photographs, both of megalithic circles (74), and another combined image of two pictures, each showing a rock wall (75). It is followed by a slide featuring views of two works of Land Art (77), ruins of an ancient city (78), colourful rocks on the beach in close-up (79), and a close-up of white round rocks with red markings, resembling human faces (80). The fact that Hasior included a picture of Smithson’s work as merely one of the examples of how humans have utilised rocks throughout history is in itself quite telling. However, what I would like to focus on is how both artists approached their subject matter. Tatar identifies similarities between the two artists: both transfer the object (physically or visually) from one reality to another (to a gallery space, to a catalogued set), whereby it becomes something else. Both made photographic records of their walks, which they later published with added commentaries (Hasior his “Photo Notebook” column in *Nowa Wieś* and Smithson “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” in *Artforum* in 1967). However, this comparison seems to suggest more differences than affinities, first of them consisting in an obvious dissimilarity of ambitions that their respective works demonstrated: while Smithson pondered on the

30 Tatar, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

nature of erosion and entropy, in short, on the forces of destruction, Hasiór focused on growth, accumulation, forces of creation. Another, much more important difference, revealed when their work is analysed through an ecocritical lens, concerns the artists' respective attitudes towards their subject matter. In his *Non-Site* pieces, Smithson sought to create a three-dimensional depiction of a site by combining its maps, photographs, and objects, such as rocks, placed in wooden boxes.³³ All these actions display a need to translate reality (and the experience thereof) into the language of traditional and experimental geography. Smithson proposes a new way of mapping but, more importantly, even though his *Non-Sites* contribute to a more extensive understanding of what a place is and how it can be represented, they embrace the very logic of mapping: the viewing subject is sufficiently distanced from the observed object to produce an abstracted version of its appearance and capture its size and its relationship with its immediate environment. In so doing, Smithson emphasises the unbridgeable gap between culture (human knowledge, science, aesthetic convention) and nature.

In contrast, Hasiór's *Photo Notebook*, although it is a product of an artistic imagination prone to succumb to the seductive power of cataloguing and labelling, and therefore of making mind maps, displays proximity of the viewer to the photographed object that undermines the possibility of responsible, that is, "objective" mapping. It is particularly distinct in the series of slides titled "Trees". Trees have been, historically speaking, subject to scrutiny as compositional elements, particularly by late 18th-century theorists of the Picturesque. In Hasiór's photographs, trees were pictured from close-up, from the bottom up, and from the distance, in a variety of forms (single, branchless trunks and in groups forming dense corridors along the road), yet, even those slides that conform the most to the rules of composition still powerfully exude the artist's intention to get closer to the photographed object, as if he had to struggle between conflicting intentions of capturing the image in its entirety and pointing to the viewers the details of their structure that so fascinated him. This conflict between the passion of an admirer and the documentary drive of an observer results in numerous images displaying some compositional "faults" stemming from the artist's inability, as it seems, to keep the right distance: several images show trees with their branches "cut off" by the frame, in others, they are hardly recognisable as trees due to a lack of context. Others still, of which there are around two dozen, do not show trees but structures made of wood: fences, sculptures, piles of boards and logs.

Therefore, I would suggest that, unlike Smithson, whose *Non-Site* series works to highlight the opposition between culture and nature, Hasiór ultimately strives to efface the boundaries between that which is human-made and that which is non-human-made. And not only for the sole reason that culture would, in his eyes, probably lose in this competition, but because the accumulation of photographed and catalogued forms and structures manifests the futility of such distinctions. And

33 R. Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites", <https://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/provisional.htm> [accessed 26 May 2019].

although Hasior's collection, with slides neatly organised and labelled, can suggest a mind prone to cataloguing, i.e. organising the world into a new, artistic pattern, his ambitions in this respect were not focused on finding the right category for an individual image. On the contrary, the slides are often repeated in a single set, suggesting that the order in which he showed them to the audience was irrelevant; furthermore, a single image (for instance the picture of Smithson's *Non-Site*, but many others as well) could feature in multiple sets, demonstrating that equally irrelevant was it to find the "right" set or category for every slide.

While Smithson, as well as Land Art in general, tended to treat the landscape as a "blank space" ready to be filled with meanings afforded by the artist's creative practice, works by Hasior – both his monumental sculpture as well as his photographs – highlight the reverse: it is the artist's practice that can, however imperfectly and incompletely, offer viewers a glimpse into the richness of forms, shapes, and processes that take place in their environment. With his works, Hasior seems to be emphasising that the forms he makes are merely weak and partial reflections of the world he observes. *The Organ*, through the context in which it was featured in the *Photo Notebook*, is no-longer only a raw, hard-edged neo-constructivist piece that fits so well with the mountain landscape, nor merely an epitome of political conflict around monumental public sculpture and its symbols, but also a manifestation of Hasior's desire to effect through his work certain unity between human and non-human-made forms, to erase the differences between them, but also the hierarchies that such distinctions imply. In his eyes, natural forms are not valued only inasmuch as they offer picturesque or spectacular views. On the contrary: the most commonplace stone and the least impressive bunch of grass is valued as much, if not more, as a great rock formation or stormy clouds.

The differences I discussed here, between Hasior and Smithson, but also more broadly, between Polish environmentally-conscious art and its Western equivalents, certainly outnumber the similarities, clearly highlighting that while comparisons like this one, regardless of how much they let us recognise the particularity of artworks made in our geopolitical context, ultimately fail to achieve more than a potential inclusion of art from East-Central Europe into the Western canon. Although certainly valuable as a way to oppose the tendency of art history to focus on vernacular elements in landscape-related art in East-Central Europe (Maja Fowkes suggested that most discussions of such works seek to highlight "how avant-garde elements are combined with the tradition of folklore of East European art"³⁴), attempts to present Polish neo-avant-garde art located in a landscape as local Land Art or in reference to the classic representatives of this trend in order to prove their "legitimate" status and therefore to inscribe them into the global art history, this act repeats, in its essence, the very nature of the distinctions that inform the perception of East-Central European art as peripheral. It is, indeed, what Piotr Piotrowski

34 Fowkes, *Green Bloc*, p. 17.

identified as “vertical” art history.³⁵ In its stead, the scholar proposed “the paradigm of horizontal art history”, whose role would be, among other things, to recover the “historic, political and contextual specificity of the work produced in each area by addressing particular local resonance of its meanings, its diachronic character and function within given societies”³⁶ in order to write world art histories (more than one unitary history) that are “polyphonic, multi-dimensional, devoid of geographical hierarchies”.³⁷ This polyphonic art history would, and should, in his view, prioritise the previously marginalised Other: the East as the geopolitical Other of the West, certainly, but also ethnic, sexual, and geographical Others.

It is my argument here that while a revision of the Polish neo-avant-garde in search of traces of movements and intellectual trends that we know from elsewhere (usually from the West) might open up potentially productive research perspectives, it also runs the risk of reinstalling the work or artist back into the “vertical” paradigm whereby it is revised through a different theoretical or historical lens, but the very nature of the apparatus used for this purpose remains insufficiently challenged. Ecocriticism may, in this context, be applied as a tool that may help “horizontalize” art-historical perspective by focusing the analysis on and giving the voice to one of the marginalised Others of the communist state: nature.³⁸ It is not my intention here to provide a summary of how communism discredited the aesthetic appreciation of nature as a bourgeois entertainment, of how the countryside was reconceptualised as a locus of vernacular culture, whose products were redesigned for the pleasure and consumption of now urban-dwelling, relocated rural population (effected by the Cepelia), or of how communist policies and propaganda transformed farming into industrialised and collectivised agriculture focused on productivity. Suffice it to say that during communism nature was treated as a “clean slate” on which the state could play out its fantasy of progress and social change.

On this backdrop, Hasior’s art presents itself as genuinely unfitting. His appreciation for all forms he observed in his environment, but particularly in nature, clearly brought out in him a desire not so much to represent and therefore to control it, but to gather as much visual information about it as possible in the hope that it would let him understand the way it worked.

35 P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, trans. A. Brzyski, London, 2012, p. 27.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

38 For recent discussions of what would be the possible objective of an ecocritical art history see: A. Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, Manchester, 2019; S. Boettger, “Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art”, in: H. Zapf, ed., *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, Berlin, 2016, np. [e-book]; A. C. Braddock, “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*, Hoboken, 2015, pp. 447–468; A. C. Braddock, Ch. Irmischer, eds., *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, Tuscaloosa, 2009.

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