

Fotograf Festival 11

Earthlings

Lukáš Likavčan

I. The Metabolism of Images

The Pencil of Nature (1844) is a short book by William Henry Fox Talbot in which the general public of the Victorian era first encountered the experimental medium known today as 'photography'. In his introduction, Talbot claims that the images his readers will encounter in the following pages bear no trace of human tampering – they are “impressed by Nature’s hands”, the results of “the mere action of Light” and chemical reactions on the surface of photo-sensitive paper. When Étienne-Jules Marey invented chronophotography in the second half of the nineteenth century, he also believed his images captured the language of nature, mirrored in the perfection of a pelican landing or a cat falling. If the human plays any role here, it is only a supporting one: ensuring the existence of the photographic apparatus and pressing the shutter. The beginnings of thinking about photography are thus a strange amalgam of a naive trust in reality with the prehistory of automation.

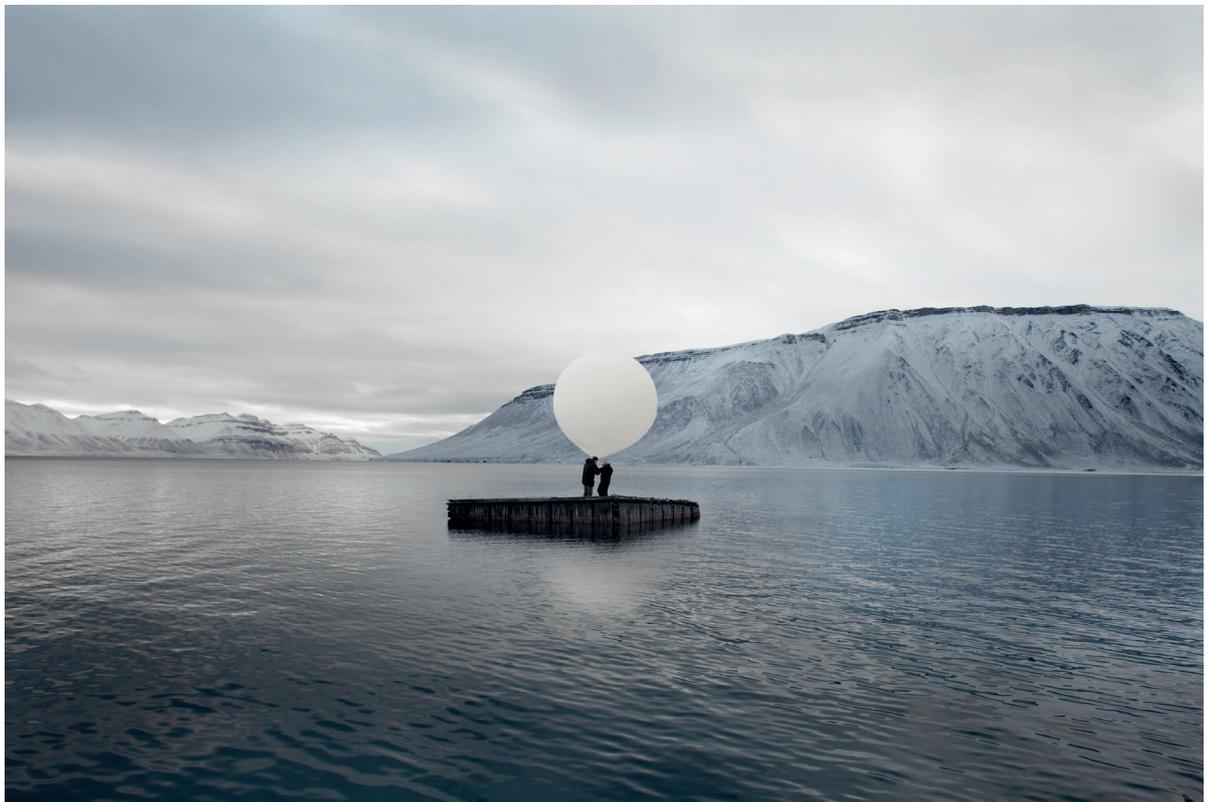
At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the automation of a considerable portion of everyday human reality is well under way, which leads us to perceive photography as something artificial. A long time has passed since we realized that the more reality is mediated through images, the more it takes on certain dream-like qualities. Nature, however, is still ‘out there’, slowly doing its work. Should we not therefore return to a naive trust in the capacity of reality to offer us traces, instructions and clues? A toxic naivety certainly exists – it serves as a medium for blissful ignorance. But there is also another kind of naivety, which has to do with being honest with oneself. Perhaps when there is no one in the forest, trees still fall and listen to each other and a human observer can be more of a burden than anything else. Not because

people should have some narcissistically tragic role of always ruining everything, but because they simply aren’t that important and don’t have to be everywhere.

To put it differently, I am interested in whether one can discuss photography today not as a medium of the representation of nature but as the medial character of nature itself – as a process of imprinting traces of biological, chemical and geological processes into the photosensitive surface of the planet. I am interested in whether it might not be true that we *discovered* photography rather than inventing it (in accord with Talbot adoring “Nature’s hand” and Marey marvelling at the choreography of a bird in flight). Satellite images, for instance, would then no longer be photographs of the terrain of the earth, but photographs of a photographic archive formed by the planet itself. Photosynthesis would then become not only the elementary metabolic process of plants but also a metaphor of the photographic metabolism of the planetary ecosystem. Perhaps even the fact that photographs are images that represent something will become secondary. Primary importance will be ascribed to the unceasing bustle of inconspicuous communication creating the history of life on this planet (in confrontation with the cosmic power of the Sun). Photography, as we have come to know it in the past two centuries, is then only a minor deviation in the metabolism of the general non-sense.

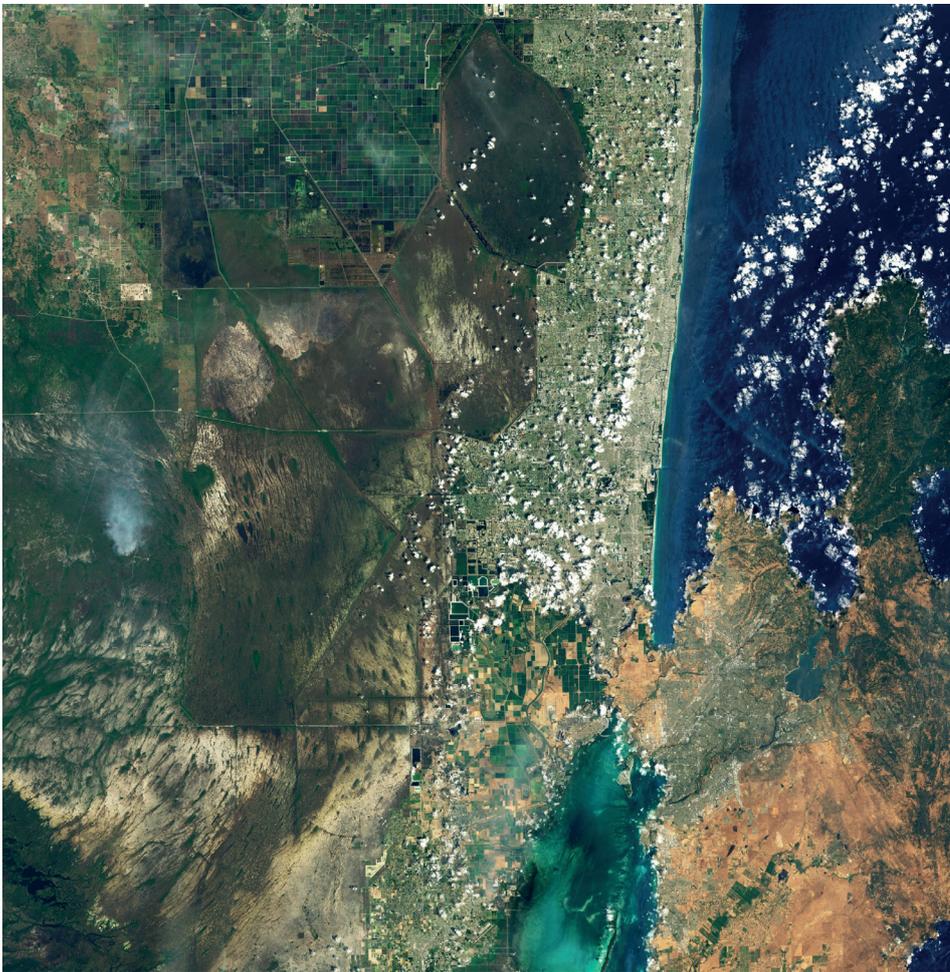
II. Folk Praxis

These reflections on planetary metabolism lead me to the following question. Who can be a legitimate witness of ongoing changes in one's immediate surroundings that cannot be understood without a knowledge of the broader planetary context (water scarcity, destructive floods, soil erosion, problems in agriculture, unbearable summer heat waves or catastrophic forest windthrows)? Let us take the climate crisis as an example. We are currently in a situation – in the Czech Republic and elsewhere – in which we hear the changes and catastrophes discussed mostly by scientists, bureaucrats, politicians and activists. They all generally use the authority of science and expert images to describe ongoing changes and approaching catastrophes. Images falling outside the established norms of scientific aesthetics and representation are absent from the public space, and the lexicon of those who are ultimately most affected by climate change is rarely used. My basic assumption – and, in a way, hope – is that the presence of the planet as an active force producing its own images and channels gives power to alternative, non-scientific lexicons and folk images.



Robert Zhao Renhui

The Glacier Study Group, photo-collage series, 2013.



Tega Brain, Julian Oliver a Bengt Sjölen
Asunder, Miami – Florida, 2019.

On the one hand, it is true that without a global scientific infrastructure monitoring our planet (stretching from the seas through the glaciers to the planetary orbits), we would probably not know anything about the existence of the climate crisis. The aim is not to deny or reject science – quite the opposite. I want to consider it as part of a broader ecology of ways of knowing and mediating knowledge. I see in this a certain fidelity to the model of the image metabolism. If we consider the channels in which knowledge circulates and is processed as an ecosystem with a natural biodiversity, it will become increasingly apparent that no form of knowing about or bearing witness to the climate crisis can have an imperial claim to overshadow the others. Yes, for proposals on the direction of international policies and technological interventions, we need the pragmatic ethos of scientific knowledge, but in modelling how to survive these times from the perspective of specific individuals and communities, it makes sense to mobilize the folk aesthetic and a sensitivity to the local. Only within the risky and ununified nature of our perspectives can we learn to describe the real terrain of what it means to be an Earthling – i.e. what it means to inhabit the extensive exterior of our planet, as well as the specific spaces of *here* and *now*.

It would now be a mistake to assume that I am calling for a return to some kind of local, traditional form of life. If we extend the metabolic metaphor to its extremes and accept the radical mobility of every particle of matter on this planet, it will become a matter of course that the entire planet is hidden in every grain of sand. Divisions into global and local oppose our notions of metabolism, planetarity and 'being Earthling' all of which are founded on the internal integrity of what might, at first sight, seem contradictory. Instead of terminological splits, let us cultivate a specific totality of praxis, in the words of Karel Kosík. I enjoy reading his philosophy alongside the Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter – for her too, the idea of praxis is central. When one focuses on praxis, Wynter proposes, one can begin to distinguish genres of what it means to be human (or what I would prefer to generalize and simply call "being a terrestrial"), which ultimately arises from the simple fact that we inhabit this planet, and everything we do, we do through it and with it. The planet thus works as a general medium which in turn uses us as its medium.



Světlana Malinová & Matěj Martinec
The Unity of Monoculture, video still, 2020.

III. Art Solves Nothing

Finally, I'd like to hand you a simple key to reading the works presented at the eleventh edition of the Fotograf Festival. I believe we are living at a time of unprecedented crisis, and that what will help us most will be to retreat a little from the position of always offering solutions, instead taking a looking around to see whether solutions might not come from a different source – from the origins of folk, sincerity and the fidelity to the event. The role of science in this process is unclear. It represents here not a target of criticism but a store of motifs and techniques one can pilfer through with the aim of commenting, overcoming and completing. And as for art: in itself, it offers us no means to become Earthlings. It can relay, however, the testimony of those who can. This is the meeting point of the flamingo with artificial intelligence, glacier cores, extremophile bacteria, an obsessive producer of complex diagrams and a growing mineral. What is at stake is not representation but the elongation of hidden knowledge; making it visible through an artistic gesture. This gesture might take the form of a raised finger, a step aside, a stare, a somersault or even a clenched fist. In itself, it merely points us toward something. In place of art as an eruption of the spontaneous spirit of genius comes art as the result of the spontaneous secretions of individual and collective bodies: fewer ideas, more slime, sweat and saliva. In this sense, this festival is not so much an intervention

as it is a pause that allows for the other interventions to reveal themselves. Art in itself, you see, solves nothing. Art simply slowly grinds down, washes out and adds precision and light to intuitions that arise from the everyday experience of the direct urgency of external reality and which find no other methods by which to temporarily present themselves. The history of photography shines a light on the path.