



POISONED PICTURES

Guest Editor: Verena Kaspar-Eisert

- 4 Christoph Schaden
Toxic Reading: Observations on the Reception of Wout Berger's Epochal Photobook "Poisoned Landscape"
- 18 Liz Wells
Critical Environments and Photographic Investigations
- 38 Simon Norfolk
When I Am Laid in Earth
- 42 Eduardo Leal
Plastic Trees
- 46 Mandy Barker
Hong Kong Soup
- 50 Jennifer Colten
Wasteland Ecology
- 54 Mathias Kessler
Disasters of Climate Change
- 56 T.J. Demos
The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics
- 68 Inga Remmers
Adventurers, Explorers, Tourists: The Polar Regions in the Focus of Photography
- 82 Aura Seikkula
Interventions in the Course of the World



Editorial

The relationship between humans has changed massively within the last decades. While agricultural work had been at the centre of human life for thousands of years, a direct connection with nature is no longer a matter of course for most people in industrialized countries today. In our mechanized and digitized age, being in contact with nature is a conscious choice. Experiencing nature does not always mean immediate encounter; nature is often consumed in an interpassive act through photography.

Since the 1970s at the latest—with the emergence of popular texts such as *The Limits to Growth*—most people have been aware of the huge influence of human activities on nature and the serious damage our capitalist way of life has done on our planet. This new awareness and the increased attention we pay to the way we treat our environment are currently reflected in the concept of the Anthropocene, which propagates the dawn of a new geological era that is shaped by humans. Today, we no longer talk of the opposite pairs of culture and nature or humans and the environment—rather, we have become aware of the reciprocal interdependencies of all earthly processes. While there is much natural-scientific debate about determining a specific geological reality, philosophical and artistic discussions of the Anthropocene primarily deal with the altered relationship between humans and nature.

It is now 2019 and we are living in a nature that is in deep crises. Or, in fact, it is humanity that is in crisis and nature is rebelling. Fires, hurricanes, floods, plastic-contaminated seas, extinction of species, melting of glaciers, rising sea levels, poisoned soils, rise in temperature, extended periods of drought – all this is reality. This is the reality we have to face.

The photographic image of nature has a defining role in the perception of nature – and that since the medium's invention. Photography serves as a scientific method of knowledge in biology and as visual proof of earlier expeditions into unknown terrain. Moreover, in allowing us to survey the jungle or an alpine mountain range without leaving our living room, photography significantly influences our ideas of nature and ecological contexts.

Nature as a rural and suburban landscape has always been an unbrokenly popular photographic theme, which seems inexhaustible both aesthetically and in terms of content. Today, photography is an important and powerful instrument for drawing attention to the catastrophic environmental effects of consumer behaviour. Still photography has its limits. Can pictures record the emergency at all? Can photographs that freeze a visual section of life represent ecology whose essence is characterised by systemic dependence? How do photographers use their tools to raise awareness for environmental issues and why do some

photographs, in contradiction, make destroyed landscapes become aesthetic objects that keep us at a distance from our crisis-ridden earth environment?

And yet, photography is one of the best ways to draw attention to the destruction of the environment; it forces us to look at the consequences of our growth-oriented way of life, to face the causes. Photography can form an alliance with ecology to achieve a new awareness of the terrestrial, to reflect the state of the human unit, and to overcome the current colonization of nature by man. Photography can contribute to a new way of thinking regarding the relationship of humankind and nature.

We need to use the power of images to change thinking and move towards a sustainable way of life. Therefore, we invited five international photographers to contribute to this issue. **Mandy Barker, Jennifer Colten, Mathias Kessler, Eduardo Leal** and **Simon Norfolk** produce such “Poisoned Pictures”, photographs that visualize man-made environmental damage and effects. These artists and photographers have in common that they take on the climate change and ecological challenges of our time with a decided artistic responsibility. They deal in different ways with the destruction of the environment, reflect and visualize it. The selected projects, which were realised on different continents – Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America –, show the worldwide growing environmental pollution as well as the resulting manifold effects on vegetation and climate and the changes in the ecosystem. The intention of each one of these five outstanding photographers and artists is to raise our awareness of this crucial issue that affects the whole world.

This issue aims at shedding light on the key role of photography in the perception of nature and its possibilities for a new environmental awareness from different perspectives and from the beginning of the medium until today. We would like to express our great gratitude to the authors **T.J. Demos, Inga Remmers, Christoph Schaden, Aura Seikkula** and **Liz Wells** for contributing to this issue of Photo Researcher with their excellent researches, thoughts and opinions on this pressing topic of environmental crises and the role and the possibilities of photography within it. Our greatest thanks go to the photographers and artists who have taken on such an important task and great responsibility with their projects.

Verena Kaspar-Eisert, Ulla Fischer-Westhauser, Uwe Schögl
Vienna, October 2019

Eduardo Leal,
from the series *Plastic Trees*, 2014,
C-prints, 80 x 120 cm.
© Eduardo Leal.

