

Photography and the environment at risk

Deadline: Jul 17, 2019

ARIP

Photography and the environment at risk : images of consequences and consequences of images in the climate crisis.

Through an extensive use of photographs, Western medias have taken upon them to tackle the issue of environmental change. In order to support their various claims on the matter, a swarm of images, which aim is to depict the current and upcoming climate catastrophe, has been disseminated across screens and printed press. In 2018, images of dying polar bears on melting glaciers, oil-covered birds and beaches overflowing with plastic trash have been extensively commented. Capitalizing on a photojournalistic tradition, the use of these images rests widely on an indexical approach to photography. This perspective imparts the photographic image with a “direct” relationship to reality, allowing it to be perceived as evidence. This hypostatized link to the real constitutes the “strength” of these photographs and the emotional charge they contain and thus pushes citizens to act. In the artistic field, reflections on climate change have also been initiated, as demonstrated by the latest issue of *Aperture* (Spring 2019) entitled “Earth”. The environmental issue is infecting photography’s images and dynamics, but few studies are focusing on this state of affairs. However, it seems essential to mention T. J. Demos, Bill Jay or Karla McManus and their studies on the use of images by Greenpeace, the visual imaging of climate change or the issue of environmental communication. In that respect, theory on the ties and relationship between photography and the climate crisis remains scarce and needs to be expanded.

Beyond the question of ideology and representation, one needs to add the study of materiality – often under-researched: the examination of what photographic production does to the environment, the ways in which it uses, transforms and exhausts it. Although Karl Marx had identified, in *Das Kapital*, the photographic industry as one of the five chief industries of the 19th century (the others being railroads, steamboats, gasworks and the telegraph), studies investigating how this specific industry operates and how it affects its environment are virtually non-existent. The recent interest in texts on the “fossil capital” and the effects of a capitalist system on the climate and the environment opens up new paths for research on the status of the photographic field regarding our production methods. In recent works, Vaclav Smil highlighted the important role that communication and information industries – including photography – played in technological innovations at the end of the 19th century, underlining the lasting impact that these industries and innovations will have on the environment. The photographic industry has however questioned its own hazardous nature, which led Kodak, in 1996, to present a hydroquinone free developer, the Xtol. In 2014, the brand LegacyPro launched a range of “eco friendly” products targeting analog photography practitioner, entitled “eco-pron”. Nevertheless, the issue of the resources used up by digital photography is yet to be explored.

Taking all of these observations into account, a dual question emerges, which intertwines theoretical, ideological and practical themes : what does the environment do to photography and what does photography do to the environment ?

How do the current theoretical and ideological discourses regarding the environment use and create an impulse in the production of photographic images and what kind of repercussions did (or still do) the photographic practices have on the environment ?

In order to start answering these questions, the following (non exhaustive) discussion topics will be considered :

- Photography's incorporation of a specific discourse on the environment

How does an environmentalist ideology incorporate itself in photographic productions ? What impact does the environmental ideology have on photographic productions ? How does the discursive complex around the environment use the photographic image to convey and spread its intentions ? Has the sudden awareness around environmental stakes generated a change in photographic productions ? Or have ancient forms been reused in order to deal with this new subject?

- The consequence of photographs' production and the consequence of photographs' consumption on the environment :

How does photography contribute to the expansion of a fuel-based capitalist system ? What consequences do photographic productions have on the photographers' and the photographic industry workers' bodies as well as on the environment ? Can we measure the impact that the photographic practices have on our environment ?

Submission :

Proposals (in .doc or .pdf, 500 words) and a brief biography of the author must be sent via email (arip.contact@gmail.com) before Wednesday July 17th 2019.

Proposals' submission : July 2019

Committee response : September 2019

Articles' submission : December 2019

Reference:

CFP: Photography and the environment at risk. In: ArtHist.net, May 18, 2019 (accessed Apr 6, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/20877>>.