

Urban Bird

and the human-nature relationships

Artist residency in Prague (CZ)
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Introduction

This project is an outcome of an artist residency carried out in Prague between August 25 and October 25, 2022. The AiR@CU artist residency, hosted by Charles University in Prague, was part of the Mistra Environmental Communication (Mistra-EC) Research Programme and offered the selected artist the opportunity to investigate and explore environmental and sustainability issues through an immersion in the Mistra EC Research at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism (ICSJ) at Charles University. It was part of a larger residency program coordinated by ICSJ's Mistra Environmental Communication Media & Art team, with additional support from the NGO Sqrige.



Artist’s statement

The topics covered by the MISTRA-EC programme aroused my interest when I read their call for applications. Indeed, in addition to their desire to involve actors from different backgrounds than academia, their approach to environmental and sustainability issues echoed my reflections on ecology and environmental protection. Having studied graphic design and illustration, the purpose of which is to communicate ideas and concepts visually, developing a project related to environmental communication seemed inspiring to me because it links these areas that fascinate me. The visual arts raise public awareness on many issues; and through my artistic practice, I particularly seek to communicate philosophical and spiritual concepts related to the consciousness and perception of the society towards the environment.

During a previous project, I was interested in people’s emotional relationship with their environment: In a society where people are increasingly connected virtually yet disconnected from reality, do they feel a connection with the places they frequent on a daily basis? Creating works of art made it possible to establish a tool of communication between people and their environment, to awaken in them some personal questions. Inspired by the Buddhist and philosophical concepts of contemplation, my project invited people to discover the subtle links between the different forms of this practice.

Contemplation is commonly understood as the attentive observation of things (for example a work of art), which results in a complete absorption of one’s attention in the things perceived by the eyes, without reasoning or analysis. Contemplation takes place in a mental calm and inner silence, with the observers allowing themselves to be drawn in by the things that make up their environment. In ancient Greek philosophy, «thêôria» is the contemplation of ideas; the examination of concepts. This attitude makes it possible to free oneself from the sensitive realm, to detach oneself from «opinion» and its conditioning towards approaching pure and perfect knowledge. In this sense, it is similar to Buddhism, which aims to dissolve mental impurity through meditation practice, resulting in a balanced mind open to the experience of joy and compassion.

To contemplate is to pay attention to what is in front of you but also inside of you. In both cases, contemplation allows you to reinstall yourself in the present by calming your mind and detaching yourself from intrusive thoughts.



Urban Bird

The Urban Bird project is a continuation of this reflection. My research and observations on the different dynamics between humans and the urban environment resulted in this visual project, examining, particularly, the relationships between humans and what they consider «nature»: fauna and flora. A concept that I discovered during my research is the concept of ecopsychology, which is interested in the development of a reasonable relationship between humans and nature, and advocates the study and the strengthening of the emotional bond between human beings and the living in its broadest sense. Due to their progressive disconnection with the wild nature over time, the city dwellers see the city as their creation, as a territory belonging to them, forming a break with what they consider primitive. Proof of this can be seen in the increased holiday offers that promote escape into nature, often emphasizing being able to approach wild animals and smell the fresh air. By naming and categorizing all things, humans created this invisible border between themselves, the non-human living beings, and the inert environment.

The series of collages created in scope of the Urban Bird project seek to explore different ways of seeing and feeling the presence of these various entities in the city. Each work can be interpreted either from a personal point of view, or by putting oneself in the shoes of the subject represented, or even from an external, neutral, omniscient point of view. In this artwork, I imagined diverse ways to symbolize these invisible borders that separate humans, non-human animals, and their environment, and then reflected on how to blur these frontiers, to abolish the hierarchy preconceived by humans. For example, intersecting mediums that are distinct from each other (collage, painting, drawing) and using them independently for each element (human, animal, environment) is one of the ways of illustrating this diversity.

The approach of the project and the images produced raise several questions: Do the difficulties of cohabitation between species (i.e. addressed in town planning) come from these invisible borders? What are they, and where are they located? What if this separation, the barriers created between “human” and “nature” begin to intertwine organically by raising our awareness, to merge until the two were no longer distinguishable from each other?



Spiritual principles and philosophical views

Buddhism views humans as part of nature, not separate from it. The boundaries which isolate humans are created by the barrier of the ego, from which humans can emancipate themselves through the practice of meditation (vipassana). This, in time, leads to an awakened consciousness that recognizes the interdependence of all things, and the existence of everything as part of a Whole. To harm the nature is to hurt the human, because they are intrinsically connected in this idea of the Whole.

The idea that feeling of oneness with the world around us is naturally linked with caring for the environment is present in the holistic system of Ayurveda as well: By recognizing our relationship and inherent connection with nature, we can begin to see how taking care of nature is a way of taking care of ourselves, and how taking care of ourselves is, in turn, taking care of the nature.

This vision closely aligns with the reflections of Bruno Latour, a philosopher who developed the idea that there is no dualism between nature and culture, arguing that these two notions are abstract and created by the human discourse. The anthropologist Philippe Descola also shares this vision, by putting the human being on the same level as all other species, by no longer defining it as an individual dissociated from nature, but rather as a being that is part of a whole - with the term «Nature» being replaced by the notion of «Living».



Link with social sciences

In the social sciences, we find the notion of biocentrism, which gives equal value to all living beings. This discourse corresponds to the spiritual and philosophical visions mentioned above, and therefore constitutes a bridge between the scientific/economic/social fields and the philosophical/spiritual/ethical aspects of the project.

The biocentric discourse is opposed to anthropocentrism, which considers human value above all others and grants moral dignity only to human beings, considering nature solely as a collection of different resources destined for the servitude of humans. There are other similar visions and discourses, including ecocentrism, which echoes the animist philosophy, and multicentrism.







ICSJ research work in the MISTRA project

These different discourses and many others have been one of the main topics around which various projects carried out by the team of researchers at the ICSJ revolve.

These research focus on the often underrepresented interconnections between conflicting discourses, environmental ethics, and sustainable development, by exploring how media and the arts can be studied and used to document and communicate these interconnections. Among the different media-based and art-based research projects of the ICSJ team, one specifically explores the relationship between humans and nature, and how nature has often been silenced in this dynamic.

These research projects are conducted primarily across the spectrum of the social sciences, such as economics, sociology, journalism, and communication studies, and therefore bring an analytical and scientific perspective to the topics addressed by my residency project.



Installations

The project Urban bird aims to be in contact with the general public, and to arouse curiosity, emotion, or questions in the viewers. This is why I chose to exhibit the project's artworks outside the gallery context, so that they would be accessible to anyone passing by. The collages were displayed in different places in the city of Prague, in the windows of organic products stores, specialized grocery stores, cafes, tea rooms, and vegan restaurants, in line with the environmental communication objectives of the MISTRA-EC project, as well as my own approach towards art communication.



Miniature exhibition

This bird-scale exhibition took place in the Karlovo Náměstí park and on the bank of the Vltava in Prague. By reproducing my residency works on the scale of birds and arranging them in places where the animals gather, I offered the possibility for my work to be confronted with the gaze of any being passing by.

In the park, animals rub shoulders with humans and occupy the space in the same way as any other city dweller. They look for interactions with people who have come to draw a little serenity and take advantage of the crumbs that have fallen from their sandwiches. They also benefit from the freshness and thirst-quenching of the various fountains. Through contemplation, we realize that they enjoy both the human presence and the flora offered by this small oasis of greenery in the middle of the capital city's effervescence.

At the edge of the river, a small beach is a meeting place between different elements: the kingdom of the air finds itself alongside the water and the earthly ones. Pigeons, ducks, nutria, and humans meet there to share a meal, take photos or contemplate the Charles Bridge and its reflections. It is a place where it is easy for humans to come into contact with the fauna: just reach out to non-human living beings with something to eat and they come running without embarrassment, making this place feel like their territory. Rightly so, because it is theirs, and it should be respected like any other place that humans share with other species.



Parallel project

Initially thinking of creating a project around the animals of the city in general, I finally chose to focus on birds, because these are the animals that we see the most every day. However, I stayed on the lookout for the details I noticed and the creatures I encountered. While looking to photograph city animals, I composed a series of photographs and noticed that I could draw parallels between them.

I saw eyes that observe, not always the ones you expect; that what humans throw away is rehabilitated by wildlife; that behind kindness can hide cruelty.



Conclusion

Through this project, I hope to have demonstrated that, in one way or another, many of the concepts that are reflected upon are related to each other, if not very similar. We find spiritual and philosophical concepts that seem very far from scientific or academic sight, yet some of them are quite similar to each other, only expressed in different words. This shows that we create a certain caesura between things, resulting from the use of our language.

The visual arts make it possible to add a different dimension to these concepts, in which discourse, as we understand it, is not used, in favor of illustrative works that can be interpreted differently by each spectator. They make it possible to elicit reactions and questions across the spectrum of experiences lived by each person, avoiding the judgments and preconceptions often brought about by the use of words.

Urban Bird is part of the desire to question our place within the ecosystem that is the city, by visualizing and expressing different, non-human-centered views on human-nature relationships, and paying attention to our immediate environment and to the biodiversity that exists amidst buildings.



Credits

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