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Review of the Doctoral Thesis entitled *Narcosis: How Art can Shape the New World* of Sarah Epping, in the field of art in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation, initiated by the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Arts and Design in Wrocław.

Basic information

Sarah Epping was born in 1989 in Holdrege (Nebraska), USA. In 2012, she obtained her Bachelor's Degree (BA) in Fine Art at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, USA. In 2016, she got a Master's degree (MFA) in Fine Art in Printmaking at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design, as well as Cambridge CELTA teaching certificate. In 2021, the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Arts and Design in Wrocław adopted a resolution to initiate the procedure for conferring the doctoral degree of Sarah Epping in the field of art in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation.

Assessment of creative achievements and artistic activity

In her interdisciplinary artistic activities, Sarah Epping mostly applies graphics and drawing, using them alternately or giving them an opportunity to co-occur within one artwork. Perfectly mastered drawing, graphic and painting techniques intertwine and complement each other in her art.

Judging by Sarah Epping's artistic and scientific engagement and by the number of exhibitions, publications, conferences and curatorial projects she has been involved in, her commitment is far more than average. She mostly participates in international events of competitive and curatorial nature. The most important of them are: 2018 Litho Tage, Kunstlerhaus, Munich; IPEP – India International Juried Print Exchange, Macrocosm (Wrocław/Poland, Mumbai, New Delhi, Goa/India, Moscow/Russia, Turkey, Washington, D.C.); 2018 BritaPrint Exhibition international juried exhibition, Madrid, Canary Islands/Spain; 2018, Wrocław School of Printmaking, Wilno/Latvia, Poznan/Poland; Liberec/Czech Republic; 2019 Litho International Juried Biennale – Kielce/Poland; 2019 Bentaray Budan Biennale, Indonesia; 2019 The Wrocław School of Printmaking, Belgrade/Serbia; 2019 "BUNT" Student Print Biennale, Poznań/Poland; 2019 Guanlan Print Biennale, China; 2019 *Zeniths*, Wrocław Contemporary Museum; 2019 Nao Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic; 2019 Individual Mural Show (Asia Vision); 2019 Awagami Factory Japan, Awagami Miniprint Exhibition; 2019 SAFA – Shanghai School of Art, China, Wrocław School of Printmaking; 2019 exhibition, Tadeusz Kulisiewicz Foundation Scholarships and Awards, Kalisz, Poland; 2019 Awagami Factory, Japan; 2020 *Emerging Lines*, exhibition between Paris, Riga, Berlin and Wrocław; 2020 *Invisible*, BWA Studio Gallery Wrocław, International exhibition between Cranbrook Academy of Art, ASP Wrocław, and Massey University; 2020 Doctoral School at TYPA print and paper museum, Tartu/Estonia; 2020 OPEN OUT, Tromsø, Norway "leave no trace" festival, Project: Exposure; 2020 "Survival Festival" Wrocław, Poland, Project: *The Resonance of Waste*; 2020 "Revive" Online Exhibition of

Art and Science, Tartu Kunstimaja, Estonia; 2021 Osten Drawing Biennale – Skopje/Macedonia; 2021 *Mapping the Anthropocene*, Curator: Karen Oremus, USA.

Sarah Epping has also participated in artist residency programmes, among others, 2020 TYPA Print and Paper Museum, AIR Program, Tartu/Estonia and 2020 MUHU Print Week, Estonian Artists' Association Homes on Muhu Island, Muhu and Saaremaa Island/Estonia.

It's noteworthy to mention her participation in symposia and conferences in the field of art and artistic creation (among others, "IMPACT 10" conference, Santander, Spain), artistic workshops, discussion panels and mentoring sessions as well as curatorial art projects (among others, 2018 Litho-Tage, Munich Künstlerhaus; 2020 *Invisible*, BWA Studio Gallery Wrocław, International exhibition between Cranbrook Academy of Art, Academy of Art and Design Wrocław, and Massey University; 2018 IPEP – India International Juried Print Exchange – exhibition curator at ASP).

Awards and distinctions for artistic activity testify to the high quality of Sarah Epping's works. In 2019–2020, she was distinguished or awarded in three art competitions – distinction for outstanding achievement in the area of drawing/printmaking, Kalisz, Poland at Tadeusz Kulisiewicz Foundation Scholarships and Award; and in 2019 distinction for outstanding achievement in the area of fine art by Jerzy Grotowski Scholarship Committee. In 2020, Jerzy Grotowski Scholarship Committee granted Sarah a scholarship – Laureate for outstanding achievement in the area of fine art.

Summing up, the artistic achievements of the Doctoral candidate, the full list of which is attached to the thesis documentation, can be considered as significant.

Assessment of didactic, organisational and popularisation achievements in the field of art

In 2018–2021, Sarah Epping gave classes to first-year students at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design teaching them the basics of etching and drawing and also preparing prints in the etching and aquatint techniques. Her courses included the interpretation of particular topics which would allow not only to develop technical skills but also enhance creative thinking and imagination.

As a crucial part of her didactic work, Sarah Epping encourages students to participate in workshops, exhibitions and extensive inter-institutional cooperation, of both regional and international level. It cannot be ignored that she has initiated and (co)organised many artistic events which is a proof of her great contribution to the promotion of art, graphic design in particular. It is an excellent way to raise students' awareness, teach them to work in a team and in other group activities. Identity and Place is a perfect example of an exchange portfolio project, in which students from Poland and the US organised the exhibition in CTRL gallery and the exchange of graphics. I'm deeply convinced that establishing, maintaining and strengthening contacts with foreign universities by Sarah Epping has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of the Wrocław Academy of Art within the country and abroad.

Special attention should be paid to the organisational activities of the promotional nature. Sarah Epping has organised the following exhibitions: *Invisible*, Broadway Gallery Detroit, Michigan; *Street Vision*, Concrete Gallery, Wrocław; 4 exhibitions at CTRL Gallery, Wrocław; *Hybrid*, Concrete Gallery, Wrocław. Sarah Epping has organized and curated 10 different international exhibitions as part of the "The State of" project (CTRL art studio, Wrocław, PL; ShowCase gallery, University in Knoxville, Tennessee, Walker Art gallery, University in Nebraska in Kearney USA, Spike Island Studio, Bristol, Great Britain, English House, Chlebnicka 16, Gdansk, Poland, Matthew's House; Allison, Ontario Canada, Nr 14 gallery, Faculty of Art, Rzeszów, Birenbaum Gallery; Oberlin University USA, Platform Arts Belfast, Ireland, Toulouse Art School: Toulouse, France, GalleryM, Opole).

She organized and curated the MYPH School of Photography exhibition at CTRL Gallery, Wrocław, Poland; *Invisible* at BWA Studio Gallery, Wrocław, Poland, led workshops, curatorial tours, and radio introductions; she co-organised and translated descriptions of works for the exhibition *Emerging Lines* at Neon Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. Sarah Epping also curated and wrote the exhibition *Revive* for Kunstimaja Tartu. During the quarantine in Poland, she held various events (eg., *Be(e) building bee houses*, BWA Studio Wrocław)

Assessment of the concept and implementation of the theoretical part, and the practical part of the doctoral dissertation

Sarah Epping submitted for assessment the written dissertation and the artwork entitled *Narcosis: How Art can Shape the New World*. The author conspicuously reveals how creative process and theoretical speculations are interconnected. In her research, workshop activities complement the theory while the latter enriches the context of the artwork.

Sarah Epping's PhD thesis tackles the issues of climate crisis and examines the role of art therein. *Narcosis* refers to the general state of awareness regarding the difficult ecological situation on our planet. First, the author argues that the negative human impact on the environment is mainly ignored, and even if it isn't, there are no effective actions taken to alleviate the problem or halt the disaster.

In the written dissertation, the author describes her inquiry into the issue, developing the amalgam of history of our species as related to the satisfaction of our nutritional needs. From this perspective, civilisation must have started with the Neolithic revolution, culminated with the industrial revolution and finished with the climate crisis at the threshold of the second millennium as a result of the global industrialisation and overproduction of goods and food.

Writing about the impact of civilisation on nature, Sarah Epping refers to the overuse of ammonium nitrates in various sectors of the economy, especially in agriculture. Since the artist's thesis is based on her own experience and her art-based research is usually combined with field research, she has noticed that the ecological crisis we are struggling with at the beginning of the 21st century started with the invention of ammonia synthesis from the gaseous forms of nitrogen and hydrogen. It was discovered by Fritz Haber, a German chemist of Jewish origin, in 1912 in Wrocław (Breslau back then). Haber got a Nobel Prize for that groundbreaking invention which was meant to resolve the issue of famine. It did in fact, but for a price. It was already an alarming signal when they started to use ammonium nitrate in chemical weapons production. Generally, the use of artificial fertilisers in order to improve yields is not considered as something negative, mostly because the problem is not visible on the ground, but rather in the seas and oceans, where they lead to death and destruction. Ammonium nitrates which were supposed to be a magical medicine for humanity are now one of the leading causes of poisonous algae blooms and apocalyptically dead zones in the water bodies all over the Earth. Sarah Epping in her artistic research focuses on what is going on in the seas and oceans following the trend of blue humanities.

The author notices the relationship between (seemingly) not related processes and global consequences of various activities. In her thesis, she refers to the conception of James Ephraim Lovelock, who argues that the Earth is a living and a conscious organism we make part of. She also mentions the Sumerian myth about Gilgamesh, which clearly manifests how seemingly positive actions driven by curiosity, overcoming fear and taking up challenges, may ultimately lead to domination and destruction. Those references are quite accurate and thought provoking.

Building up the context for her artistic explorations, Sarah Epping argues that ecological problems caused by human activities, result largely from attitudes, mindsets and global economic systems. In particular, she

critically scrutinises capitalism as the system based on cumulating and profit gaining. However, it would have been worth referring to social systems because we can ask ourselves a question if violence against the natural environment may have the same roots as discrimination against women and the Other? Whether the relation of domination, control and possession/exploitation towards the Other can be translated to the attitude to the planet and natural environment? This is what eco-feminist philosophy explicitly states. The author mostly refers to male authors although at the very beginning of her dissertation she says that ideologies dominate science – new perspectives echoed in the text could have been laid out more specifically. In particular, the need to embrace the problems and attempt to overcome them rather than ignore, so often postulated in the posthumanist thought, for example, by Rosi Braidotti in her well-known text *The Posthuman*. Sarah Epping also refers to the Anthropocene theory though she never mentions the name of Donna J. Haraway. The texts of hydro-feminist Astrid Neimanis (eg., *Hydrofeminism or Becoming a Body of Water*), could have also been mentioned in the context of climate changes invisible as their dramatic consequences are mostly present in the water and underneath.

Having read Sarah Epping's doctoral dissertation, one can say that she pays special attention to the creative process, where she starts with examining the problem and then only puts forward the theses and suggests the solutions. The author attaches great importance to being confronted with the problems she deals with in her art. Tackling the harm to the environment present in the remote corners of the seas and oceans, the artist is trying to reach those places and see them with her own eyes so she can broaden and extend the knowledge by means of her art. So the process plays a crucial role here. The research has resulted in drawing and graphic works, mixed techniques works as well as intermedia activities. The techniques, from drawing to graphics, painting elements, collage, to the objects make up the original way of imaging which allows the recipient to deepen their reflection.

From the formal point of view, the works do not raise any doubts. They are characterised by excellent drawing and graphic skill, composition awareness and immense sensitivity in narration building. The organic forms, natural elements, or herbal images referring to the oceanic depths used by the doctoral candidate, perfectly build the climate/atmosphere of the topic she tackles. Graphic and drawing elements intertwine, complement each other, creating beautiful, colourful, large-format compositions. Sarah Epping uses the artistic means with great accuracy, with love for detail and sensitivity of a vigilant observer. On the one hand, she is aware of the beauty and power of nature, on the other hand, of its impermanence and threats – we witness the coral reefs and fertile soils disappearing, many species going extinct, and the Arctic ice sheet melting. Sarah Epping sees the seas and oceans as spaces greatly associated with colonialism. Since our planet is largely covered by water, traversing of which was essential for spreading influence and building colonies, Stefan Helmreich, anthropologist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, states that globalisation in fact should be called oceanisation. Sarah Epping's artwork depicts the underwater depths so rarely visible to the human eye. Those are not only the marine-theme graphics. Combined with artistic research and the actual exploration of the double world by the artist, they fit the so-called hydrological turn, in the framework of which scientists, philosophers, humanists or artists are trying to see the world through the lens of liquid/fluid categories. "Water as nature appears as both potentiality of form and uncontainable flux; it moves faster than culture, with culture often imagined in a land-based idiom grounded in the culture concept's origins in European practices and theories of agriculture and cultivation" – underline Helmreich.¹

Being deeply involved in the process, the artist thoroughly analyses every stage of artistic production and confronts it with the problems examined. She inquires if image creation can be considered a pro-ecological practice. Graphics depicting the underwater world, sea creatures and other representatives of the aquatic

¹ Stefan Helmreich, *Nature/Culture/Seawater - Theory Machines, Antropology, Oceanization*, w: *Sounding The Limits of Life. Essays In The Anthropology of Biology and Beyond*, s. 96.

ecosystem are meant to visualise the world which, being invisible, disappears unnoticed. In such a way, Sarah Epping implements her main artistic goal to raise ecological awareness. In this visually-centered culture, seeing/noticing images can be the first step to establish a relationship and, paraphrasing Donna Haraway, build a bond and refrain from ignoring problems. *As we can see from the artists and movements above, raising awareness is no longer enough. There is a need for active change* – writes Sarah. Such a way of thinking is one of the trends in contemporary art called activism/attractivism.

What we also observe in the doctoral thesis of Sarah Epping is the willingness to be active and get involved in the remedial processes, so not only does she feed the imagination of observers with technically perfect graphics, but also approaches the process of their creation with thoughtfulness and care. Thinking of the materials used for graphics, she decided to adopt a more ecologically-friendly way to make paper on which the image would be reflected (especially in the context of ammonium nitrate pollution). She produced paper from sea plants with *Ulva Prolifera*, a weed living in the Baltic sea, as the main component. The author writes that *Kelp and sea plants can absorb CO2 from the sea and thus the atmosphere, helping to combat the effects of pollution on the planet. They are also a reliable and healthy food source, and some species can grow up to 60 cm a day, faster than any land-based plant, including bamboo.*

Such artistic activities which are looking for solutions of ecological problems have been called ecovention by curator and philosopher Sue Spaid. Ecovention, that is the combination of ecology and invention, according to Spaid, constitutes the artistic strategy within which the artist initiates the process and by means of their creative invention physically transforms the environment. The fundamental goals of ecovention are to remedy and protect the natural environment.

For Sarah Epping, the main goal of her art based research is to reduce the consequences of nitrate pollution and at the same time create an ecologically-friendly artistic process. The artist successfully uses the strategy of ecovention following the trend of eco activism where action for change is more important than the material product. In this perspective, not only the artwork itself but also the action and the artist's attitude are seen as art. Sarah Epping creates by observing the reality, inquiring, experiencing, recognising the problems where she does not ignore them (in line with the new materialist feminist philosophy) but takes an active role in the process of their overcoming.

The whole process of the PhD thesis preparation – art-based research, travelling and exploring the situation, offering solutions, creating images, art book, video materials, sensitivity, tenderness, thinking about the environment and her own actions – reflect the post-humanistic desiderata of Rosi Braidotti. In the book *Posthuman*, the philosopher assumes the recognition of trans-species solidarity and symbiosis with other species, and as consequence, recognising ourselves as part of the ecosystem, as well as breaking the division between people and technological systems to open up to new perspectives of zoe-centric egalitarianism.

The doctoral dissertation and the series of works *Narcosis* testify to an in-depth creative process and high awareness of the activities undertaken, proper assessment of its significance and impact on the broadly notion of ecosystem. The thesis and artistic activities testify to the knowledge, intellectual potential and artistic awareness of the doctoral candidate. The author is a reflective person of high sensitivity and social responsibility.

Conclusion

The candidate for the PhD degree Sarah Epping has performed to evaluate the dissertation work at a high artistic level, representing an in-depth analysis of her previous activities and creative achievements, an original look at the undertaken artistic and research problem.

The dissertation work *Narcosis: How Art can Shape the New World*, artistic activity, as well as didactic, organisational and popularisational achievements in the area of art, fulfills all the requirements posed on the theses aimed for obtaining the PhD degree.

Considering all the above and the overall artistic activity of the candidate, I support the motion of the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław to award Sarah Epping the PhD degree in the discipline *fine arts and art conservation*.

Opole, September 13, 2021

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Magdalena Krawiec". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.