

HYDROMEDIA: SEEING WITH WATER

project statement

The climate crisis is announced in images, but leaves the imagination orphaned. On the one hand, there are many images of raging wildfires and violent floodings. On the other hand, there are images created by scientists studying the warming of the atmosphere and its effects on life on earth. Although these images are mostly kept from the public, they are probably more important than the ones we are confronted with on an almost daily basis. Scientific images, for example, take the form of heatmaps showing the rising temperature of the oceans, graphs detailing the increasing amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere, or macro-photographs of arctic or antarctic ice cores with which long-term climate evolution can be researched. Without the data such images produce, would we even know that something drastic was afoot.

Both types of images have one thing in common: they reduce the general public to passive on-lookers. Scientific data are unreadable for us, uninitiated viewers, while the images distributed by mass media seem so overwhelming that they render us powerless. We can only succumb to the sublime horror they represent. Both types of images also suggest that the solution can only be found in reinforcing human control of the environment. In that sense popular as well as scientific images only seem to exacerbate the crisis: to propose more human control to mitigate a situation caused by human meddling with nature in the first place.

What is missing in our current media environment are images which can propose a more healthy relation to the biosphere on which life depends: one in which mankind is not portrayed as the supreme lord of nature, but an integral part of it. Alternative images require a production method whereby the human producer is only partially responsible for the created images. In other words, these new images should be created in close collaboration with the various forces at work within nature. Such a method would be based on direct contact with non-human organisms, chemicals, or minerals constitutive for the lifeworld. In such a constellation the human actor who initiates the process is no longer the sole author of the image, but relinquishes outdated notions of authorship to create a post-humanist vision in which other species, minerals and chemicals are invited to impress their own presence.

Water is elusive, never fixed and never solid, not even in a frozen condition. Constantly stirred or even besieged by outside forces, it is the element par excellence where the distinction between inside and outside dissolves. The desire to become like water is what the human mind constantly craves, wrote the French philosopher Georges Bataille. Only in rare moments of ecstasy, as he stated, one becomes like water in water: a feeling of being immersed in the world, where existing boundaries and borders are lifted and the body becomes cosmic. Being like water might prove a great lesson for the climate predicament. We will have to learn again that we are not just in the world, but entangled with it. Hydromedia proposes experimental and artistic approaches to seeing with water which, we hope, will contribute to the dismantling of the anthropocentric perspective inherent in classical, lens-based photography