

Michalina W. Klasik

The Secret Activism Manifesto

I believe in Earth

I believe in compassion

I believe in the possibility of creating new, good stories about the world

Stories that will teach us to inhabit the Earth "gently and tracelessly", mindfully living in the world. Visual language has a great communicative potential, which facilitates building clear meanings, available and transcending divisions. I keep wondering: How can I do it wisely, do it right?

I believe in the (secret) activism

My direct and strongest inspiration comes from activists – "ordinary/extraordinary" people, who have been rising to rebel, protest, often putting their health and lives on the line. The area of my "statement", however, is not that direct. I must admit I cannot muster enough courage to get involved in face-to-face confrontation. Also, my attitude follows from my intuition that peaceful, subtle but consistent action is also effective and necessary. Expressed this way, the message may have a chance to reach groups other than people open to protests, and therefore expand the effect of communication. I was wondering: What do I call this attitude?

Some time ago, looking through comments to Mikołaj Smoczyński's works, I happened upon his text about the cycle "The Secret Performance", where he wrote: *My attention reverted from ambiguous abstractions and focussed on the area of self-discovery and existence. (...) I have never been a performer, and I surely don't feel like one right now. I have never mustered enough courage or this specific impudence, which are necessary to perform in public. (...) my actions have always been for photography's sake only. The experience of one.* What Smoczyński defined as a "secret performance" meant documenting only the traces of his actions, his presence.

Being an activist requires character traits similar to being a performer, as he says, and I relate to his inability to find them internally. At the same time, I do feel a strong need of joining the voices contesting the anthropocentric vision of the world – and I participate, but in a more gentle, slightly poetic manner, where you can find only traces of my protest.

"The Secret Activism" is a project for which I have created my works for several years, but it is also the attitude I follow in life.

At the moment, I am working on two complementary cycles. The first one – "Polish Landscape" – refers to the situation of Polish forests, where the state forest industry is trying to turn the ancient, naturally precious wildlife into cultivated monocultures, grown solely for wood. This activity, harmful to us all, is unacceptable in the face of the pending climate catastrophe and during the sixth mass species extinction. Such a situation refers to many European countries, Poland included. Within this project, I spend much time in the forest – wandering, taking photos, protesting, while the collected material serves as the basis for new paintings and objects.

At the same time, I browse the internet and find photographs of people hugging trees. They embrace them gently, with care. I save these photos and process them to blur out facial features, details of clothing, to bleach colours. The figures start to emanate their internal light, becoming alike – as if they belonged to one mysterious tribe – enormous, global, good.

The term "tree-huggers" is used not only to describe people who like hugging trees and absorbing their energy, but mainly for ecologists/ those who stand up for nature. Several years ago, Polish activists chained themselves to trees, in defence of the Białowieża Forest, the oldest one in Europe. It has been a few months since a group of activists started camping out in the Carpathian Forest, trying to prevent its logging.

It is said that the first "tree-huggers" were 294 men and 69 women of the Indian Bishnois tribe, who died in 1730, trying to protect the forest in their village against being cut for wood and used for palace construction. Dying, they were hugging the trees till the end. Their/our fight goes on. Here, now, still...

I believe that you are a secret activist too

I use the term "The Secret Activism" to define my own attitude in art and life, but I think it could accurately describe activities of many people, also beyond the field of visual arts. It complements and extends activism. In a subtle way, it appeals to people and shapes their attitudes. Secret activism encourages the co-authoring of new, good narratives about the world, to help us empathise and collaborate to build a better future.

I believe in cooperation

I believe (despite all) in humankind.