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Abstract

In the age of the Anthropocene we have to face problems such as the precarious quality of life or the impact of pollution and global warming on Earth's climate and all life forms, asking ourselves how artistic practice or Social & Human Sciences are able to deal with them. Is art still capable to produce alternate visions of the future in the face of the disruption of globalization? Can theory face the age of advanced capitalism? Do the views of artists and theorists still have an impact on society? Is man the "savior" of Nature or just a careless consumer? Is technology a functional instrument or an intruder in our everyday life? What meaning does the concept of Nature still have? In this context, a new post-human view is desired together with a thorough reconsideration of nature as nature in itself, and with a firm acknowledgement of an independent animal phenomenology and animal *Umwelt* (typical environmental world). Thus, one should notice the inevitable turn to a posthuman aesthetics that no longer follows the modern decree that everything is to be understood in relation with the human. A redefinition of Social & Human Sciences (ecology, anthropology, human geography, urban planning, and environmental studies) as an interdisciplinary field together with a reconsideration of such concepts as "human", "subject" and "life" is also to be noticed. In conclusion this paper aims to present an analysis of recent concepts and themes of the posthuman paradigm, together with the application of these concepts in the artistic field (both international and Romanian art scene will be in focus) and their influence on contemporary life and politics.

Keywords: *aesthetics, posthumanism, animal, agent, art, anthropocentrism, vitalism, new materialism, ecology.*

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Context

As inhabitants of the new geological age, commonly named Anthropocene, we have to take into consideration the key influence of man and technology on Earth's climate and all life forms. In a time when humans can remotely control death by lethal intelligent drones and perform biogenetic experiments as the cloning of Dolly the sheep, questions as "Is man the Nature's savior or just a careless consumer?", "What meaning does the concept of Nature still have?", "Is technology a functional instrument or an intruder?" are waiting for an answer. It seems that, once technology has penetrated the biological sphere, life itself, the living matter, has become a new form of capital.

Moreover, today's criticism and activism should face the disruptions of globalization and the increasingly sophisticated political menaces. Thus, in their well-known critique of contemporary capitalism, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello make the society aware of a political system which succeeded to swallow and incorporate all its opponents (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999). The authors raise a question on how this brand new and virulent form of capitalism achieved to install itself without rising so much of a criticism. If we take into consideration the fact that from its very beginning the capitalist system was accompanied by two different forms of opposition – the 'artistic critique' (in the name of liberation and authenticity) and the 'social critique' (a protest against egoism and suffering), we have to notice that in time both forms had become weaker and weaker. It seems that in the nineties this so-called "networked" capitalism got free from the menace of the communist parties (most of them were finding themselves in a state of involution and decline) and, at the same time, discovered a perfect antidote to neutralize the artistic critique – absorbing and incorporating its main claims.

Thus, we see a stronger genre of post-Fordist capitalism appearing, one imbibing elements of the '68 spirit', therefore promoting the values of expressive creativity, fluid identity, autonomy, self-development, multi-tasking, team-working and 'flat' management. The bourgeois entrepreneur capable of risk, speculation and innovation and the heroic director of the large, bureaucratic, centralized corporation were replaced by a new figure, the cool capitalist resembling Bill Gates or Steve Jobs,

charismatic leaders gifted in communication, intuition, vision and mobility. Control has become internalized in each employee sharing the dream of the leader. Any client (perceived as a king) or employee has become a part of this world virtually without bosses, ready to involve themselves in the ongoing 'project'.

The capitalist rejection of any hierarchy and top-down control and the enforcing of the flexible 'network' as central organizational figure of contemporary world dangerously redefine former critical theorists like Deleuze as gurus of this new rhizomatic form of capitalism. At the same time, artists such as Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Ai Wei Wei, walking in Andy Warhol's steps, incorporate the very capitalist core in their artistic practice. Thus we have to ask: are we facing the death of theory and criticism? Does artistic practice still have the power to liberate, to de-territorialize?

The posthuman condition

As feminist theorist Rossi Braidotti noticed, after a long period of theoretical creativity in the 1970s and 1980s, "we had entered a zombified landscape of repetition without difference and lingering melancholia" (Braidotti 2013, 5). On the right of the political spectrum we encounter nothing but dystopian views (F. Fukuyama, S.P. Huntington), on political left, the neo-communist intellectuals (Badiou and Žižek) militate for concrete political action and violent antagonism.

More and more theorists accept the fact that we are facing a time of "theory-fatigue" together with a decline of humanism and Humanities. In this regard, authors like T. Davies, conclude that all the historical variants of humanism have been imperial. And this happened because all of them were defining man in the name and interest of a single race, nation, and genome (Davies 1997, 141). Voices like that of Bruno Latour also question the applicability of theory as an instrument of representing and comprehending the world.

Despite all that, posthuman theory provides the means to surpass this point of doubt and hesitation. In Braidotti's opinion, we can chose among three strands of the so called posthuman thought. One is an analytical strand, interested in science and technology, cyborgs and

body augmentation, an approach which provides productive insights into “crucial ethical and conceptual questions about the status of the human” (Braidotti 2013, 39), but is reluctant to develop a theory of subjectivity. Another one is the reactionary posthumanism, interested in the restoration of classical humanism. This trend ignores any insights of the anti-humanist movement denying the decline of humanism entirely, arguing rather that humanist ideals provide the only workable model for adaptation to the globalized economy. Last but not least is the strand which Braidotti identifies herself with, the critical posthumanism, an approach that aims to “move beyond analytic posthumanism and develop affirmative perspectives on the posthuman subject” (45). This strand is rooted in critical schools like the poststructuralists, anti-universalist feminists, environmentalists and post-colonialists, in that each of these groups is concerned with an understanding of the individual subject and his place within the structure of humanity as a whole.

In this context, in Braidotti’s view, the posthuman theory is nothing but an empirical but non-reductionist, critical but non-dystopian approach, a generative instrument helpful in the process of re-thinking the referential unity of “The Human” and the principles of human interaction with human and non-human agents on a planetary scale. The posthuman subject will be non-unitary and nomadic. The ethics will be Zoe-centric, following an ethical model that values a generic, not-specifically-human life force, which would decentralize “The Human” from questions of ethics, and instead encourage us to make choices that take into consideration *all forms of life*.

Contemporary thought searches for a method to surpass the modernist substantial, anthropocentric view. Deconstructing the subject from Descartes through Lacan, Jacques Derrida, in his turn, attempts to uncover the fraudulent grounds on which the human has been defined in opposition to the animal and thereby claimed superiority over it. As an alternative to Cartesian “I think therefore I am”, the philosopher proposes a new formulation: “The animal looks at us and we are naked before it. And *thinking* perhaps begins there” (Derrida 2002, 369-418). A couple of questions stand out here: how do we know that thinking is so different from sniffing or scenting and why is this zone of sensibility so neglected or reduced to a secondary position in philosophy and the arts?

In this context, one should also focus on the fact that *agency* can be a category that exists separately from thought.

In conclusion, a *biocentric* relation that acknowledges the inherent value of other life forms should replace the classic anthropocentric relation that sees only humans as centrally significant and represent the world accordingly. Among other demands, we have to consider how the 'animal question' illuminates the manner in which humans are able to apprehend their own and other's existence as well as related spatial qualities (Dixon 2012, 253).

Inanimate things, interpreted as *agents*, will also be in focus. One of the most recent and visible approaches comes from Jane Bennett, Professor of Political Theory, with an intellectual trajectory indebted to aspects of the work of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, and Bruno Latour. She coined notions as "the power of things" or "vital materiality", built upon Foucault's "bio-power" or Jane Butler's "bodies that matter". Her new political imaginary surpasses the traditional framework of subject vs object/other, de-centering the human but at the same time affirming the necessity of the human embodiment as site of agency and part of a network or assemblage of human and non-human agents. In her attempt to take "things" more seriously than other political theorists did, she manages to relate the aesthetic and ontological features with a political signification.

A new paradigm rises and its key concepts are: interdisciplinarity, vitality, body, senses, the animal other, environment, non-human agents (stones, crystals, clouds, living cells and trees), new materialism.

The posthuman science and aesthetics

All these challenges call for a redefinition of Social & Human Sciences (ecology, anthropology, human geography, urban planning, and environmental studies) along with a reconsideration of the artistic practice and theory.

First, one should notice a tendency in Social & Human Sciences towards a re-evaluation as a whole, as a unique interdisciplinary field. At the same time, contemporary art redefines itself as a socio-political

practice, as an applied anthropology as well as a field of enquiry where truth and knowledge are to be encountered.

At the beginning of a new century we are also facing a significant series of aesthetic challenges implying provocative artistic mutations and unexpected theoretical approaches. New hybrid domains such as artistic nano- and genetic technologies or *geo-philosophy* (Deleuze) spring out.

In order to identify the post-human paradigm's mutations, new concepts and their artistic application, the following interdisciplinary journals have been consulted: *Dialogues in Human Geography*²; *Environment and Planning A, B, C, D*³; *Contemporary Aesthetics*⁴. Some recent books on posthumanism and posthuman aesthetics (see bibliography) along with a series of Neo-Darwinist approaches have been also taken into consideration.

In this way, after consulting a series of articles in *Dialogues in Human Geography* one reaches the conclusion that the aim of this scientific community is not to aestheticize geographical themes but to maintain a philosophical relationship with Art and Politics in the context of breaking away from Human Geography's past confinement to the human perspective. At the same time, aesthetics is viewed as a personal experience of landscape (Dixon 2012, 250)

Environment and Planning also reveals to us that the role of Aesthetics is to open scientist's frameworks of thinking beyond the humanist limitations.

Contemporary Aesthetics proposes a turn to post-human aesthetics: a type of aesthetics that no longer follows the modern decree that everything is to be understood in relation with the human and by referring it back to the human. We've already discussed the tendency of interdisciplinarity among sciences that practice an exchange of methods, concepts, theories, in the end forming a whole, an interdisciplinary field. In this context, aesthetics itself has recently grown into a rich and varied discipline. Its scope has widened to embrace ethical, social, religious, environmental, and cultural concerns.

² <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg>.

³ <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/eprn>.

⁴ <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/>.

In addition, differing from the classical Kantian approach of aesthetics as a celebration of human rationality, the post-human aesthetics is rooted in the pleasure of senses shared by both humans and animals. *Agency* can be a category that exists separately from thought. There is a distinction between subjectivity and *agency*, between what might be termed a sense of self-in-the-world, and a capacity to shape that world (Fudge 2006).

In a second stage, an applied analysis has been conducted with regard to the national and international art field. A number of artistic projects, following the key concepts and themes of the post-human period, were identified. In the case of the Romanian art scene, the period analysed in this study was the year 2016. All this data were used in the process of generating new theoretical approaches and artistic works in the frame of *D PLATFORM: a cultural instrument and interdisciplinary portal for the Danube area*, an artistic research financed by CNCS for the period 2016-2017.

The art of 'the Animal Other'

A new posthuman approach is also needed in the artistic field, together with a thorough reconsideration of nature as *nature in itself*, and with a firm acknowledgement of an independent animal phenomenology and animal "*Umwelt*" (typical *environmental world*). Here the "*Umwelt*" is the totality of possible actions of the environment on the sensitive body surface of an agent (human, animal) and the possible actions of the agent on the environment (mechanical, chemical etc).

As an example, Great Bowerbird's (*Chlamyderanuchalis*) practices are read by bird behaviorists as a culturally conditioned "sign" of mate quality. Found across the savannas of Australia, the 14 bowerbird species that construct bowers have become iconic for evolutionary biology, behavioral ecology and biophilosophy as well as a recurrent theme of artistic projects.

The male birds "design" the bowers, varying by species from stick "towers" up to 3 m high, to "huts" up to 4 m in diameter, and they are decorated

with as many as several thousand flowers, fruits, mushrooms, snail shells, butterfly wings, stones and other natural and human-made objects⁵.



Fig. 1. Great Bowerbird's artistry,
<https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/270708627574642355/>

The birds use plastic straws and lids, bills and other human made objects without any regard for their human determined functionality. They simply choose them for their appearance, form or color, as *found objects*, as parts of an artistic installation. One can observe that *human intentionality* is aborted. The relation between human and animal, observer and observed is altered.

This is a neo-Darwinian, aesthetic “play” that aligns birds with humans in that they have behaviors and characteristics that transcend ‘mere’ natural selection; as Darwin himself remarked, birds are the most aesthetic of all animals. The new paradigm implies a Darwinist frame of aesthetics wherein there is a crucial difference between: *natural selection* (environmental fit of randomly produced traits) and *sexual selection* (may well deploy seemingly ‘detrimental’ traits, such as elaborate bower

⁵ Diamond JM, “Animal art: variation in bower decorating style among male bowerbirds *Amblyornis inornatus*”. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* (1986), 83: 3042-3046.

construction.) Sexual selection thus highlights the capacity of 'choice' in the selection of a mate in a way that shapes 'artistic virtuosity as a fitness indicator (Dixon 2012, 258).

As Darwin went on to state "[w]hether we can or not give any reason for the pleasure thus derived from vision and hearing, yet man and many of the lower animals are alike pleased by the same colour, graceful shading and forms and the same sounds" (Darwin 1871/2004, 88).

We have to ask ourselves: How is it that beauty and a sense of beauty arise in the context of utility, without being a sense of utility *per se*, or reducible to utility? In this context, the theoretician Wolfgang Iser appreciates beauty as *a capacity in and of itself*, one that cannot be reduced to an awareness of fitness and a desire to mate (Iser 2004). In conclusion, beauty has to be judged beyond both the species limit and a simplistic alignment with sexual drive and desire.

In their work *A thousand plateaus*, chapter *Of the Refrain*, Deleuze and Guattari deliver another interesting interpretation. A bird sings to mark its territory. Taking a close look at the manner in which a child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath, the authors conclude that the song is like a rough sketch of a *calming and stabilizing center* in the heart of *chaos*. The role of the refrain is territorial, a territorial assemblage. In the same way the Greek modes and Hindu rhythms are themselves territorial, provincial, regional.

In this context, the territory is the product of a territorialization of milieu and rhythms. There is a territory when the rhythm has expressiveness, when milieu components cease to be functional to become expressive.

Therefore, it is the mark that makes the territory. Can this becoming be called Art? That would make the territory a result of art and the artist the first person to set out a boundary stone, or to make a mark.

In this sense, the bowerbird experiments resonate with Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the figure of the artist and the 'work' of art. The artistry of the birds moves us from the comprehension of territory as tied to aggression, such as we find in bowerbird science, to territory as a form of art tied to expression. That is, in reconnecting territory to rhythm and expressive marking.

The bowerbird lays down landmarks each morning by dropping leaves it picks from its tree and then turning them upside down so the

paler underside stands out against the dirt: inversion produces a matter of expression (“*becoming- expressive-territory*”) (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 348). Each leaf is no longer simply part of a *milieu* but has been converted into an artistic medium by dint of the repetitive, territorialising behavior of the bowerbird. In describing the bower as a “*ready-made*”, they note a common, cross-species denominator of working with what is to hand (Bogue 1991, 89)

“Art is not the privilege of human beings. [...] Not only does art not wait for human beings to begin, but we may ask if art ever appears among human beings, except under artificial and belated conditions.” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 338).

Stones, living cells, crystals, clouds and trees

Moreover, we can talk about beauty and aesthetics with respect to plants, stones, live cells etc. In this sense, Alfred Whitehead, in his *Philosophy of Organism*, considers that aesthetic value permeates all levels of experience. Therefore, the concept of *value* (moral, aesthetic) can be related to the intensity of experience, in other words with the outcome of *limitation* (whether we are speaking of an electron which is limited in experience to orbiting a proton or a human being choosing one action over another). For Deleuze as well, sensation is neither cerebral nor rational, nor is it harbored in phenomenology’s lived body; rather, it is constituted by the vital powers and forces of rhythm and chaos (Deleuze 2005).

In this context, even if a stone lacks sense it still possesses a form of perception, of experience, that allows the stone to negotiate its boundary with the earth it rests on and the air around it.

We can conclude that in the natural world “understanding” is not privileged. There are also other subjective forms of satisfaction (experience) that do not have any relation to human consciousness, such as those expressed by living cells, crystals, clouds and trees (Shaviro 2009, 12).

This idea is illustrated in *The Sixth Shore*, an artistic project by artist and geographer Perdita Philips, implemented at Lake Clifton, Australia (2009-2014). The project engages with notions of geological time prompted by the presence of a reef of *microbial thrombolites* living in the

Lake, whose evolutionary lineage goes back to the 3.5 billion year. *Thrombolites* (The living rocks) are made up of a complex community of microorganisms, including cyanobacteria, bacteria considered amongst the oldest evidence of life on earth.

Phillips creates a spiral of tiny sounds, like the multitudinous field of microbes, a descent into geological past, opening us out onto scales beyond our senses, a window onto the *sublime*.

A new question arises: To what degree, in what form, and with what import, might we consider such *thrombolite* colonies, like bowerbirds, to have an aesthetic sense and an artistry?



Fig. 2. *Thrombolites* (The living rocks),
<http://carmelwallace.com/symbiotica/5-p1000178/>

First we have to take into consideration that *thrombolite* colonies do not revolve around reproduction, but *accretion* (the working of viscera and membranes in the context of physiological and biochemical gradients).

In this sense it is true that bacteria have, under the scalar logics of normative cognitive science, long been thought too simple and too reactive to have cognitive capacities. But, recent biogenic approaches have insisted upon bacteria as having the capacity for remembering, problem-

solving, learning and communication (Stotz & Griffiths 2008, 37-45). What is more, bacteria are not just to be considered singular entities collected en masse, but are also framed here in terms of their complex collective behaviors, division of labor and mutual living (See Lyon 2007, 820-833).

If we consider the process of *sense-making* as a series of syntheses: a *passive, organic syntheses* (metabolism) which allows a superior *passive syntheses of perception* which, in its turn, allows for a third synthesis, the *active syntheses of thought*, then in the case of animals (bowerbirds etc) we can identify two types of synthesis while for *cyanobacteria* only one, the most basic: the organic synthesis of the elements of water, earth, light and air, experienced, sensed on a visceral level. Here we face *an organic expression* at the scale of genes and nucleotide sequences. (Dixon, 2012).

In conclusion, *Sense-making* is no longer to be apprehended, as in Kant's third critique, as a transcendental analytic, with aesthetics as a higher level of emergent complexity. Instead, *biological sense making* proffers the *a priori*, but always concrete, genesis, of organic time and space (Deleuze 1994, 98).

Another relevant approach comes from Jane Bennett, political theorist and author of *The Vibrant Matter* and *The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter*. In her work, Bennett fights against the picture of the world as naturally divided into active bodies (life) and passive contexts (matter). In this sense, in her view, as the body is more than a "landscape" for the exercise of "will", the landscape itself will be more than a geo-physical surface upon which events play out. Therefore, a landscape will be better understood as an "assemblage" or working set of vibrant materialities. Bennett builds on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to define an "assemblage" as follows:

"Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. ... Each member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage" (Bennett 2010, 23-24).

In Bennett's view, the Vibrant Matter surpasses the hegemony of the subject-object binary. Her work opens a world in which agency is distributed across an ontologically diverse range of bodies, not a world

of agents and their objects, a world where the key role is reserved to the vitality of materiality *per se*.

What she tried to do in her work is to take “things” *very* seriously. And here by “things” she means the ordinary stuff around us that we possess and use. It is important to notice that stuff like this has “thing-power”: it commands attention as vital and alive in its own right, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes poetry, or inspires fear (Bennett 2004, 350).

“These vibrant animals, plants, viruses, hurricanes, storms, pharmaceuticals and other technological artefacts vie with, make demands upon, and impede and enable human agency. They make their presence known to us or, one could say, make ‘calls’ to which we are continually responding”. In Bennett’s view, the literary-visual-artistic ethical task at hand is to try to describe just what this ‘call’ is without resorting to the framework of pre-given subjects and objects.⁶

Art in the posthuman paradigm

As we’ve already seen, a new series of artistic projects have emerged from this urge to reconsider the *otherness*, the non-human. Animals are engaged by international artists such as Olly and Suzi, Mark Dion, Paula Rego, Perdita Philips and Sue Coe in the making processes of the artworks, often through the marking of surfaces. The resulting co-produced artworks become then the ‘genuine artefact of the event’, of the animal’s *Umwelt* (Baker, 2000).

In this context the human should take into consideration the shift from the trivial representation of the animal to the real animal interaction and concern. Aesthetics is redefined as a field of knowledge that enables us to reflect and ask questions about identity, creativity and posthumanism.

An interesting analysis of the international art scene is delivered in the book of Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*. Baker explores how animal imagery has been used in modern and contemporary art and

⁶ Klaus K. Loenhardt, *Vibrant matter, zero landscape: Interview with Jane Bennett*, in GAM – the Graz Architecture Magazine and Eurozine, <http://www.eurozine.com/vibrant-matter-zero-landscape/>.

performance, and in postmodern philosophy and literature, to suggest and shape ideas about identity and creativity. In this sense he analyses the work of such European and American artists as Olly and Suzi, Mark Dion, Paula Rego and Sue Coe, at the same time looking at the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Joseph Beuys and other significant late twentieth-century artists.

Among a series of examples of posthuman art works we find Mark Dion's installation *The Library for the Birds of New York*, exhibited at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in March 2016. The project consists of a huge cage where books, arranged in a tree structure, can be explored by a flock of birds. The books in a heap at the base of the tree all relate to birds and nature, while up on the branches are volumes on astronomy, art therapy, urban policy, homicide, even a copy of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. All these works are connected to our desire for understanding the world, and the cage reflects that human impulse to master it. But at the same time the birds inhabit their own *Umwelt*, gradually covering everything with their droppings, and do not care for the human knowledge or for the human need for domination and control.

Another relevant example provide the drawings and illustrations of Sue Coe, an English artist and illustrator (a former student at the Royal College of Art, London), working primarily in drawing and printmaking, often in the form of illustrated books and comics. Coe is a militant for animal rights (grew up close to a slaughterhouse). Her work is highly political, often directed against capitalism and cruelty to animals, factory farming, meat packing, apartheid, sweat shops, prisons, and war.

A number of artists seek to encounter (and represent) the subjective life-worlds of the animals. Thus, animals are engaged by these artists in making processes, often through the marking of surfaces. The resulting co-produced artwork then becomes read as the 'genuine artifact of the event', of the animal's *Umwelt* (Baker 2000, 13). One has to notice the shift from *trivial representation of the animal* to real interaction, authentic experience of wonder or fear as antidotes to anthropocentrism.

A suited example provides the work of Olly & Suzi, a collaborative group that had graduated from Saint Martin's School of Art in 1987. The collective made numerous expeditions to remote regions of the Earth in order to paint predators and prey at close proximity in their natural

habitats. In most of the works they solicit “assistance” from the subject in the form of paw prints or bite-marks.

In 2016, the Romanian scene of visual arts was also marked by the posthuman ideas, starting with personal projects as *Old Trees* by Florin Ghenade or *Captured landscape* by Ariana Hodorca (both exhibited at Posibila Gallery) and continuing with complex artistic researches such as D PLATFORM (an interdisciplinary collaboration focused on the shores of Danube among artists, philosophers and art theorists, anthropologists and landscape architects from Iasi and Bucharest) or the exhibitions series *The white point and the black cube*, curated by Anca Mihuleț and Diana Marincu at The National Museum of Contemporary Art.

One should also mention *Bucharest Art Week 2016: The Lesson of Nature*, curated by Oana Tănase (Posibila Gallery, November 2016). This project provides an adequate example of taking into consideration *the animal other*, thanks to the participative installation of Lumír Hladík which engages the bears from the Canadian woods. In short the artist uses in his installation food cans marked by his co-authors, the bears leaving in their natural habitat.

Another interesting project is *Where touch begins, we are*, by Nona Inescu (ODD Gallery, November 2016). The installation consists of a series of (living) rocks collected from Prahova Valley, technologically augmented in order to interact with the public by sending audio signals at any human touch. The artist investigates the role of the haptic and the post-human idea of redefining the human starting from perception and senses. Eliminating the distance between stone and human, the technology will paradoxically become a symbiotic liaison, an agent of life and being.

One of the best posthumanist artistic projects was *The Interstitial Space* by Nita Mocanu & Marius Stoica, exhibited in the summer of 2017 at ODD Gallery. Inspired by vital materialism and Jane Bennett’s writings in particular, the work tries to represent space taking into account the proximity of things, the way in which the subject is lost in the network/assemblage of objects and it is transformed in turn, together with the network/assemblage it is contained in. The artists are interested to experiment a kind of interstitial privacy, privacy defined starting rather from the well-being created by the relation with the ally-objects in their proximity – privacy as an ecology of their well-being.

In the frame of D PLATFORM artistic research (financed from Project PN II-RU-TE No 336/2015, 2016-2017, www.dplatform.ro), the public from cultural centres such as Bucharest, Iași, Cluj or Regensburg (Germany) could attend a series of interdisciplinary conferences (May: *Nature. Culture. Dwelling*, December: *Anti-Nature and Post-Humanism*), presentations and exhibitions. The starting point is the Danube space, a space that can be interpreted as a heterotopia or a meeting place for cultures, civilisations, personal destinies, ideologies, different temporal layers. The central theme is the renegotiation of the relation between Nature and Culture with the battle between technological innovation and the counter-offensive of Nature swallowing the abandoned factories and offering in return reserves of beauty and authenticity.

As adequate examples of post human artistic works from D PLATFORM we can quote the *site specific* intervention of the young artist Cristian Ghiță (planting a Living Sculpture, 2016, at Sfântu Gheorghe) and the exhibition curated by Raluca Oancea at Posibilă Gallery (decembre, 2016) which includes works by Lucian Bran, Bogdan Bordeianu, Andrei Mateescu and Iosif Kiraly.



Fig. 3. D PLATFORM, site specific intervention, *Planting a Living Sculpture*, 2016, Sfântu Gheorghe

The political implications of critical posthumanism and vital materialism

As we've already noticed, critical posthumanism delivers a thread of thinking with both ontological and socio-political implications. The critique of the classical humanism, the attack against anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism, the preoccupation with environment place it right in the middle of the most relevant debates in the field of today's Political Theory. Following the paradigmatic model of Joseph Beuys (concurrently a visual artist, a theorist, a teacher and an environmental activist) the contemporary posthuman artist, at his turn, reveals himself as a complex character playing multiple roles in the society. In this sense his active behaviour, his social and political implication are beyond any doubt.

And yet, there are still voices that question the meaning of ecology and the value of "Nature" itself. For example, in his problematic talk, *Ecology: A New Opium of the Masses*, Slavoj Žižek states that there is no *politically transformative power* left in "ecology" (Žižek 2011, 35-51). One of his objections to ecology concerns its allegedly necessary reliance on an image of nature as *an intrinsically harmonious and moral order*, which we can refer to for guidance in organizing a polity. He calls instead for an ecology without nature.

What can be said here? Even if the de-construction of the traditional concept of Nature could be useful today, it is obvious that Žižek reduces any invocation of *natura naturans* to a secret longing for *natura naturata*.

Another objection concerns the possibility that ecology has succumbed to the capitalist imperative of contemporary life, according to which "political action and consumption become fully merged". We recognize here the influence of Boltanski's theory on *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

In an interview on landscape and environment, political theorist Jane Bennett delivers a relevant response:

"Indeed there is little subversive edge to green marketing or to ecology reduced to a 'problem of sustainable development' and is also true that capitalism works ruthlessly and creatively to absorb its opponents. But, can ecology (as a complex system of words, sounds, deeds, affects, narratives, propensities) really ever fully merge into the allegedly totalizing system of capitalism?"⁷

⁷ See Klaus K. Loenhart, *Vibrant matter, zero landscape: Interview with Jane Bennett*, in GAM – the Graz Architecture Magazine and Eurozine, <http://www.eurozine.com/vibrant-matter-zero-landscape/>

She invokes further the claim of Deleuze and Guattari: “from the viewpoint of micropolitics, society is defined by its lines of flight [...] There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes [...] the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine. Things that are attributed to a ‘change in values’, to the youth, women, the mad, etc.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 238f).

In the same interview Bennett named two pragmatic problems that pushed her in the direction of affirming “vital materialism”. The first was the intensification of an alarming trend in American public culture wherein a rise in the invocations by politicians of other worldly powers (the Judeo-Christian “Almighty” combating “forces of evil”) was paired with the positioning of violence and torture as legitimate tools of state. In this context, we have no doubt that the proclamation of the possibility that an un-designed order of materiality could nevertheless possess the impressive, dynamic, incalculable, awesome and awful qualities elsewhere ascribed to God or *Geist* becomes an act of courage.

The second problem was the ecological destruction, or the globalizing political economy devoted to extraction and exploitation, waste, commodification, human imperialism and winner-take-all. In this sense she confesses: “I am a vital materialist who sees positive, pro-green potential in raising the profile of the fact that any human ‘I’ is itself made up of ‘its’ – of a vast array of originally and to varying degrees persistently nonhuman elements, such as bacteria, metals, ambient sounds, the ‘trains’ of images of other bodies.”⁸

Consequently a human act doesn’t exercise exclusively human powers, but expresses and engages the agency of a variety of other actants: including food, micro-organisms, minerals, artefacts, sounds, bio- and other technologies. For Bennett neither a human individual nor a stone, considered alone, has real agency. The real locus of agency is an assemblage, a human-nonhuman collective, therefore, human agency is the outcome of a certain configuration of *human and nonhuman* forces.

In this context we can conclude that social problems are not moral problems, as they don’t imply only human agency and responsibility (as

⁸ See Loenhardt, *Vibrant matter, zero landscape: Interview with Jane Bennett*.

if we were in control of nature). In fact Bennett herself confesses that the guiding question of her book is: How would our political analyses of events change were they to acknowledge an elemental, material agency distributed across bodies, human and nonhuman? The political implications of what at first we considered just an ontological stance have become clearer now.

In an era of different “post” prefixes – post-modernism, post-feminism, post-truth – it is important to accept and understand what are the challenges and implications of a new paradigm, the post-humanism. In this sense, what can be interpreted at first as a simple ontological stance proves to be a complex series of aesthetic and political claims and opportunities.

In the posthuman era, artistic practice seems to be strongly linked with Politics and Anthropology and at the same time with Human Sciences, in the context of their breaking away from their past confinement to the anthropocentric perspective and redefinition of the Human along with the classical Humanism, and their trying to maintain a philosophical relationship with Art and Politics. As a field of knowledge that enables us to reflect and ask questions about posthumanism and as an invitation to thought, Aesthetics, at its turn, does not take the form of a systematic methodology, but rather a ‘tracing’ between Science, Philosophy and Art around the notion of sense-making.

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