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IN FRONT OF OUR EYES

Revolutions-realised

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to show how art responds to contemporary problems, to what extent it is able to make the viewer aware of the conditions in which we live and the still developing state of climate crisis. In the article I focus on bioart, presenting selected artists who show the degradation of ecosystems in their works and try to show the relationship between man and nature. Invoking the metaphor of Mother Gaia, I follow the analyses of ecoethics to point out human duties and responsibilities for the current state of affairs. In my analyses, I primarily try to show the artistic rift between art itself and activism, and the role of art in today's crisis-torn world.

KEYWORDS

bioart ; Matka Gaja ; rewolucja ; kryzys ; zmiany ; transgresje

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In front of our eyes

Non-Realised Revolution

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The myth of Frankenstein and how it all began

Tissues, stem cells, plasma, blood have replaced pigments, just as the laboratory has become the workshop. Contemporary art has gone beyond the confines of the studio, just as it has gone beyond the confines of our idea of reality. In the 19th century, Mary Shelley posed the question of the limits of human creation. What frightened the romantic writer was, above all, man's scientific capabilities and the blind following of them. Shelley is convinced, which she expresses in her story about Dr Frankenstein, that science can blind us and technological possibilities can turn out to be a dangerous trap. Man assumes the role of god and begins to create without any control, which in the 19th century writer's view is dangerous. In the 20th century, man, still enthralled by scientific reality, despite his reservations and doubts, began to play with science on an unprecedented scale. Bioart is like playing with science and at the same time it is the production of a work of art in visualised artistic expression. The boundaries have been blurred. What goes on in the artist's head can be translated into the analogue and electronic world without limitations. Tissues, stem cells, plasma and blood have ceased to be merely an element of physiology or the research domain of scientists. Artists have entered laboratories.

Art has always offered perspectives of transcendence, first of all of the artist's own abilities, his capacity to perceive and describe the world, then increasingly becoming a transcendence of culture or humanity itself. This was pointed out by André Malraux, who in *Transformations of the Gods* traced the successive movements of artistic possibilities. According to Malraux, neither the anthropologist nor the philosopher is able to describe the world accurately; bound by methodology, the limits of concepts and tradition, they must follow either the classical interpretation of the world (authority), or the concepts themselves and what their research tool allows them to do. The artist for Malraux is a freed man, who in his art - not always consciously - transcends what is imposed on him in cultural narratives¹. That is why, as Picasso writes in *Supernatural*, he understands certain issues better than an anthropologist, and his „girl with a skipping rope can meet a figurine from a Dogon village”². In this way, the artistic transition also allows for the creation of new qualities, making art neither European nor African, but a new dialogue between cultural worlds.

Transformations of art: attempts to shape cultural narratives

The transcendence of art can simultaneously become transformation. The world in art projects is not so much reflected as created anew. This is why Anish Kapoor, creating *Cloud Gate* or *Sky Mirror*, works between the elements, air, earth, water, inserting new meanings into the space of culture as well as nature, another element which art becomes. The viewer can follow the artist and oppose himself, the habits instilled during socialisation, which separate man from nature in a cocoon of symbolic images. For Ernst Cassirer we will always be in symbols anyway, and through them we will build an image of seeing the world³. For Anish Kapoor, everything depends on what exactly we bring into reality. Symbols and images can be turned into a mirror reflecting the world, admittedly still a borrowing, but it turns our gaze in a completely different direction. The viewer of Kapoor's art can, thanks to this very thing, completely lose his or her pre-conceived notions of categories and reality. What was sky is water, and what was earth is air.

The reconfigurations made by male and female artists signify a shift from what 'seems' to be to what is 'impossible'. This is why art can be provocation and revolution. Group's naked bodies Femmen bear witness to this best. Nudity contrasting with a police uniform, a woman armed with

¹ André Malraux, *Antypamiętniki*, transl. J. Guze, Warszawa 1993.

² André Malraux, *Przemiany Bogów*, v. 3: *Ponadczasowe*, transl. J. Lisowski, Warszawa 1985.

³ Ernst Cassirer, *Esej o człowieku. Wprowadzenie do filozofii kultury*, transl. A. Staniewska, Warszawa 1971.

her powerlessness, handcuffed, led out of the space which she had just occupied in a performance. After Femmen's actions, there is usually red paint on the pavement and amazement that one can once again try to oppose what is indestructible from the perspective of tradition: regimes, religious dictatorships or the male-centric structure of our world. Femmen constitute an unfulfilled revolt because they constantly have to repeat the gesture of opposition locked in the servile imperative of masculinity. Just like the nomadic subjects described by Rosi Braidotti, who, analysing contemporary culture, discovered what is most painful in it: eternal unfulfillment. Since 1968, we have lived in a world of countercultural struggles, where the revolution cannot end. Femmen, even though pornographic art has found its way into the salons, will therefore still shock with nudity aimed at the order of the deconstructed world.

Art can reach where our conscience is silent. Preoccupied with a consumer lifestyle, following the demands of the free market reality, we do not count the carbon footprint we leave behind. We simply follow the reality so well characterised by Baudrillard, Bauman and other masters of postmodernity. Human beings need to go on holiday, eat well, own and continually evolve. Scilla Elsworthy-style activists can only appeal for moderation and dialogue, they can only ask us to negotiate, but we overeat the world anyway, heedless of the climate crisis and the great extinction. Only Willy Verginer's chemical-drenched deer inspire (temporary?) horror. Bright, as if bleached, with hooves dipped in black and green liquid. Verginer gives us a picture of the world in *Between Ideal and Reality*. In principle, he does nothing out of the ordinary. He shows the consequences of our selfish work in naturalistic terms and proportions. Here are animals crossing our path, like a guilty conscience, drowning in our toxic waste.

Classical art, the beauty of the landscape, the still life of the Flemish masters accustomed us to death. In a world governed by the Cartesian division between machine-animal and human-consciousness, violence against the non-human world was natural. The outstretched body of a dead rabbit among flowers, apples, grapes, a whole array of vegetables and fruit spilled on the table - no one is surprised. Neither does a dead hen lying next to it. The beauty of Adriaen van Utrecht's work classified as a still life by the Flemish masters tames the sight of the death of an invisible animal. The rabbit, just like the hen, is treated as an object of everyday use, reduced to kitchen simplicity and aesthetic value. The death of an animal makes no impression on anyone, because it is the death of a machine which is supposed to serve us anyway.

Eco-revolutions

In the 20th century, however, something surprising happens. Aldo Leopold, Baird Callicott, Thomas Regan, Peter Singer, Holmes Rolston III, Henryk Skolimowski, Paul Taylor start writing and convincing society that the animal is not a thing. Carol Adams argues that meat is not the food of everyday life, but of violence, in a phallogocentric world where male domination begins with the ritual eating of the body: the slaughtered animal, the hunted game, the domesticated creature, and ends with the consumption of the woman reduced to a body-object. *The painting devouring the landscape* by Bartosz Kokosiński encloses a dead, hunted deer in the canvas. It is like an indictment of all tradition, chauvinistic madness, speciesist stigmatisation and domination. The still life is literally wrapped in canvas so that no one can enjoy the aesthetic image of violence anymore. The deer is thus buried in a canvas shroud, no longer an artefact, a Cartesian machine, but a human victim. Wickedness is laid bare and perhaps this is the greatest revolution of art.

Perhaps Albert Camus was right when he claimed that rebellion in search of values, in the name of the other, in opposition to injustice, can only take place in art. In every other field it becomes the terror of a bloody revolution. The scorched earth, the destroyed ecosystems, the great extinction constantly escapes our eyes. As long as we can buy and own, as long as we have the commandment of cultural self-fulfilment, we will follow the commandment of anthropocentric egoism. No IPCC report, no philosophical or ecological analysis will make us suddenly give up our habits and prosperity. For contemporary man, an observer of how the earth burns, the spire of Notre Dame Cathedral is still more important than scorched stretches of jungle, lost tundra, Amazonian forests or burnt Australian bush. The burnt koalas will still move us, but the battered land will no longer be the object of our horror. When the roof of Notre Dame Cathedral burned, people around the world could not sleep, praying and weeping for the loss of cultural heritage. When the lungs of the world are burning, butchered by our selfishness, we sleep peacefully. The dream of the unjust.

The art revolution reveals what we don't want to see, complaining about a loss that seems extraordinary to us. Fabian Knecht's works are a silent remorse, a scorched earth depicted, mourned by no one. The Isolation series shows precisely what is most important: although we inhabit the earth in such large numbers, it still dies in solitude. Mother Gaia, as Lynn wanted Margulis and James Lovelock, is our strength and our commitment⁴. Thanks to Mother Gaia, affectionately called 'the blue planet' by a spoilt child, we can live and enjoy well-being. But we have forgotten the child's duty to one's ageing mother, we have put her in a shelter, we do not see her death, busy with our

⁴ James Lovelock, *Gaia. A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Elżbieta Bińczak-Hańderek, „Wieja” - oil, board, 2020



Source: author's archives

own lives. We do not see that she will die with us. According to Jem Bendell, this knowledge is too traumatic for contemporary man, so we prefer to deny it and pretend that we still have time to improve the climate⁵.

Fabian Knecht, Vibha Galhotra or Nilbar Güreş in their works expose the loneliness of Mother Gaia, her agony in the midst of people busy with the development of their great coal civilisation. Camus, writing about the rebellion of art, sees in the artist's work the possibility of truly speaking about the world, of giving it categories that allow for a deeper view of reality. Without the artist's intuition, sunflowers simply grow, they are, they are an element of the world so natural that it is invisible to our sensation-seeking eyes. Only the mad van Gogh, when painting his *Sunflowers*, actually gives them to us, reveals their essence to us, giving us their values on canvas⁶. Without van Gogh, the sunflowers would only continue to grow. After van Gogh they already begin to exist, to have value in themselves. Just like the flowers-human-organs in Javier Pérez's *Inner Garden*, where man-flower, body-plant acquire meaning, begin to exist as one, realising Rosi Braidotti's postulate about breaking through anthropocentric thinking, crossing the nature-culture divide. Braidotti, writing about the contemporary human condition, points to the possibility of a new sensibility, in which man can finally become-at-earth⁷.

The artist does not always win, his art will not always fulfil his intentions. As is the case with Alba, Eduardo Kac's rabbit. The rabbit with jellyfish cells and fluorescent, bright green fur did not surprise anyone, but outraged ecologists, becoming a figure of enslaving an animal for the sake of empty entertainment and man's egoistic need. And so the artist lost, fortunately, irritating people enough for ethics to once again speak out in defence of animals. It is simply that artistic rebellion sometimes takes place outside the artist's intentions, not where he planned it, and at some point it is the viewer who adds and paints the punch line or develops the revolution.

⁵ <https://jembendell.com/2019/05/15/deep-adaptation-versions/>.

⁶ Albert Camus, *Człowiek zbuntowany*, tłum. J. Guze, Warszawa, 1991.

⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, tłum. J. Bednarek, A. Kowalczyk, Warszawa 2014.

Lost opportunities

Bioart can be reduced to a game in which the artist enters the role of Dr Frankenstein, transgressing the limits of biology, imagination or common sense, but it can also become a diagnosis. Stelarc's desire for a third hand or a third ear is a transhumanist dream in which man breaks away from himself and gains new possibilities. Stelarc's ear listens for others, for his audience. The unnecessary third hand carries the potential that the bionic limb of the mutilated man will begin to develop. The artist's play turned out to be a serious matter, a task for humanity, of restoring fitness and self-confidence. In his works, Stelarc becomes Donna Haraway's cyborg, becoming a machine, abolishing the binary and the opposition between the natural and the technological⁸. Bioart becomes a realisation that humanity cannot yet afford, but has long dreamed of.

The problem is, as Lauren M.E. Shows. Goodlad, that Frankenstein's monster is an eternally open project. A dream that has broken off the lab's production line, our research and existential failure. This is why contemporary culture is full of unfinished form⁹. Man is unable to finalise his work, he is afraid. In this aspect, art may be a veil hiding the scientist's lack of responsibility (Alba rabbit, like every cloned animal, was doomed to illness and a short life in the laboratory). Art can also become a dummy that, in the projects of creating a hybrid, realises only what bears the hallmarks of artistic creation, without seeking an answer to the question: "What for?". In this way, the revolutionary potential spills out into a series of tasks and realisations, without delving into structure and responsibility. In this way, Frankenstein's great unfinishedness begins to be realised.. And in this sense Goodlad is right, Frankenstein's work is not so much abandoned as unfinished, becoming a human being in an unfulfilled existential situation.

This halfway suspension, this aborted gesture of revolution, is our greatest weakness and the greatest sin we commit against Mother Gaia. The world is burning, we have 20 years left according to conservative estimates, 4 according to realistic figures. After that there will be no turning back 2020 was the hottest year in decades, we are a measly four years ahead of the point where the avalanche of world destruction caused by the greenhouse effect and our mindlessness will begin. We do not have time to be frightened or to misunderstand the problem. It is time, as Jem Bendell puts it, for deep

⁸ <https://sites.evergreen.edu/politicalshakespeares/wp-content/uploads/sites/226/2015/12/Haraway-Cyborg-Manifesto-2.pdf>.

⁹ Lauren M.E. Goodlad, *Looking for Something Forever Gone. Gothic Masculinity, Androgyny, and Ethics at the Turn of the Milenium*, „Cultural Critique”, 2007, No. 66, pp. 104–126.

Elżbieta Bińczak-Hańderek, „Dzieje” - oil, board, 2020



Source: author's archives

adaptation, that is, learning to live in a world of crisis, in which water shortages, migrations, climate change, lack of food and basic necessities may turn out to be an everyday occurrence. Meanwhile, we leave the gallery or the cinema in shock, rub our eyes in amazement after yet another book and... do nothing. The revolution is stuck at the halfway point.

What Mary Shelley intuited has been trivialised in pop-cultural renditions of romantic drama. What is a big problem has become the plaything of artists in successive laboratory task-manifestos. A third hand, a third ear, a green rabbit, all for the bored, overeager viewer of Western culture, who, after consuming gadgets, needs to consume art, preferably the "strange" or shocking kind. Voyeurism has taken over our needs, so it is best for artists to also be blunt and massacre our emotions. The voice of those who scream that we no longer have time, engaged artists, activists, academics and researchers, is mixed with performative entertainment. Instead of understanding and deep adaptation, instead of addressing the dying Mother Gaia we prefer entertainment. In the realm of politics, it does not fare much better, as everything ends up in a parade of successive rallies of the greats of this world, parading before a column of journalists with a sense of mission and power. However, a demonstration of power has never saved anyone.

The lack of systemic solutions, the lack of individual awareness, the few who do something for the world, the trivialised youth movement and their protests (in a scornful commentary stating that when they grow up, they will deal with normal life and it will pass) - all this makes us blind. Meanwhile, the crisis has already begun, the climate bomb has already been activated. We treat the world as if it were in our imagination, as if it could be changed at will. All the time we behave as if we could turn everything around. Meanwhile, reality is all around us, increasingly tired and increasingly degraded. Mother Gaia is dying. Alone. In front of our eyes.

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