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BEYOND THE PRINCIPLE OF UNITY

Abstract: In this article, a reflection on unity and dispersion focuses on the moment when the projection of human condition onto the tissue of the world became visible in the most quantifiable and dangerous ways for the planet, tearing apart the vision of unity of human endeavors. These ways are discussed in sections: 2. “Destruction” and 3. “The Anthropocene – a scene of human presence”. In section 4. “What Art has to do with it”, links between some contemporary art practices and the broad context described before are searched and analyzed, using, among others, Bourriaud’s concept of “the exform”.

Questions that arise are: How much of this dispersion is still due to the World Wars? How much is due to the ecological crisis? Is there unity in artistic ecological strive to confront the challenge?

Keywords: unity, coherence, disintegration, destruction

Introduction

In this article, I would like to reflect on the moment when the transposition and projection of human condition onto the tissue of the world became tangible and visible in the most quantifiable and dangerous ways for the planet. I will discuss these ways in the sections that follow: 2. Destruction and 3. The Anthropocene – a scene of human presence. In section 4 – What Art has to do with it – I will try to link some practices of contemporary art with the broad context described before. I will also pose questions such as: What is the “reaction” of artists? Is art in any way “obliged” to react?

A projection of human condition that verges on disintegration, dispersion and coming into pieces is not new to the *universum* of literature and art. It has been perceived and experienced many times before. Below I give a Baroque example of John Donne's poetry, although more recent examples were certainly connected to the experience of the World Wars. The rising awareness of the Anthropocene is another such moment when the feeling of certain unity of human efforts in life and art yields to the feeling of dispersion and disintegration – the feeling that the Anthropocene is the scene of human presence, a recomposition of pieces getting deep into the core of the Earth.

The feeling of unity and, more precisely, conviction that a universal strive – some constructive basis for expression – to organize it exists in human presence, was shared e.g. by František Kupka who wrote in 1923: “a dancer in motion produces the same curves and straight lines that a painter or sculptor inscribes in immobile matter [...] art is always an orchestration of presences in time and space.”¹

But what when this orchestration of presences becomes nightmarish marasmus, or an orchestration of consumerist needs devouring hopes for the future? How is then art supposed to orchestrate presences in time and space?

Is this unification and falling into pieces cyclical, or are both “paradigms” – the paradigm of unity and the paradigm of dispersion – simultaneous in different epochs? Perhaps this time we are experiencing an unprecedented challenge for any idea of unity of human efforts on Earth, since human presence and actions might be read as a threat to the unity of natural processes on the deepest levels. Thus, the projection of human disintegration or dispersion is not only finding its way onto canvas or paper, but actually into “anatomy of the world”.

1. John Donne, My Contemporary...

“Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,
 All just supply, and all relation;
 Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
 For every man alone thinks he hath got
 To be a phoenix, and that then can be
 None of that kind, of which he is, but he.
 This is the world's condition now, and now [...]”²

¹ František Kupka, František Kupka, after: Jean-Ives Bosseur, *Musique et arts plastiques: interactions au XXe siècle*, Minerve, Paris 2006, p. 56.

² John Donne, *Anatomy of the World* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44092/anatomy-of-the-world> accessed: 22.07.2022

The famous Baroque poet John Donne writes “now, and now (...)” in his poem entitled “An Anatomy of the World”. And yet this poem could very well be written “now and now” in our times, deploring time and again the disappearing coherence of what we perceive in the world. How wonderfully accurate and modern is the statement: “All just supply, and all relation”, as if Donne had read Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational aesthetics* and/or was an ecologically-aware leftist thinker criticizing endless supplies of all the produce with which – one may dare to say – we try to fill the gap, or rather abyss, of the lack of coherence. However, what we obtain is emptiness “illustrated” by all the waste we produce, destroying endless possibilities of life on the planet.

What was lack of coherence for John Donne ? What were the pieces that he mentioned?

To find out, one can have a look at dictionary definitions of coherence.

In defining coherence, dictionaries focus on two aspects:

- a) the quality of being logical and consistent
- b) a fulfilled possibility to form a united whole

Therefore, lack of coherence signifies an impossibility of the whole or an impossibility of being logical and consistent. In John Donne’s *An Anatomy of the World*, “the pieces” point to the former – impossibility of the whole, totality, unity.

Nevertheless, does the lack of coherence really concern “anatomy of the world”, as John Donne puts it? One might think the opposite as well, bearing in mind natural processes, be they chemical, physical, or biological – anatomy of the world is consistent, forming repetitive wholes of different processes. Or, one could find examples to prove both: coherence and a lack of it, depending on the interpretation of entities and events, of processes as they integrate or disintegrate us, or the world around us.

Thus, it seems that when Donne writes about coherence that is gone, what he means is rather a certain mindset of his epoch, a philosophy of human sciences at the moment when he diagnoses such a condition. The coherence that is gone in “anatomy of the world” in Donne’s poem is a projection of the human condition onto the tissue of the world. This metaphorical sense of the projection has, however, gained intensity and realness in contemporary times. It would be difficult today not to think about disintegration of “anatomy of the world” due to human intervention in natural processes.

2. Destruction

In a heavy atmosphere of geopolitical events, the question of human drive for destruction does not seem abstract but, unfortunately, finds vivid illustrations in reality: war, genocide, massive destruction of natural and urban landscape, and depletion of natural resources, which results in various species dying out. Unfortunately, the list continues.

Where does this will for destruction come from? Why would we ever destroy the place where we live – Planet Earth?

According to Erich Fromm,³ the answer to this question was given surprisingly late, in 1920, by Sigmund Freud. Or, actually, if we consider the chronological table of his works,⁴ his first extensive study of the destructive instinct study definitely appeared in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

The mentioned date is, of course, not a matter of chance. Escalation of violence in the world made various theoreticians of the time ponder on the question of destruction.

Freud is most often associated with libido and sexual desire. Actually, however, the time after the first World War, when Freud was concerned not with the urge for love and unity but rather the urge for death, destruction and disintegration, constitutes an important turn in his works. He called this instinct *Thanatos* – a term taken from Greek mythology where *Thanatos* personifies death bringing people to the underworld. In fact, both war (destruction of people) and destruction of the planet come from the same source – human instinct for death, hate and destruction, which is as strong as our instinct for life, love and creation – *Eros*.

At that time, instinct theories (neoinstinctivism) suggested that such a drive in people is inborn and natural, so not much can be done against it. Konrad Lorenz, the author of *On Aggression*,⁵ was one of acclaimed authors who stated that the will to destroy and aggressiveness were inborn. Yet, Fromm argues that Lorenz's vision of an inborn destruction drive is successful because it allows people not to feel responsible for it. Thus, Fromm finds such theories of an inborn destruction drive very dangerous because they let people stay passive, as if they can do nothing about it. In this sense, optimism and hope concerning the human condition, often seen as naïve, are also weapons against defeatist thinking.

³ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Vintage Publishing, 1997.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, transl. Joan Riviere, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, London (1962) 1966, p. xxii.

⁵ Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (1966) (*Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*, 1963).

If we perceive the human imprint as harmful for “anatomy of the world” from the very start, already at the time of planting crops, at the dawn of agriculture and animal breeding (Neolithic Revolution), it seems that we may arrive at a conclusion that anything that has been done by humans has only added to the destruction of the planet. The danger of this conclusion lies in the fact that it is defeatist. In this sense, the choice of the name “Anthropocene” for the geological epoch characterized by a human imprint can be viewed as pejorative by many humanists. The most extreme interpretation states that it began already in Neolithic times (in agriculture and animal breeding). Some scientists, however, see the first problems with the Anthropocene in the Industrial Age. It is the case with Stroemer (a biologist) and Crutzen (an atmosphere researcher) who have come up with the term. The name was coined in response to an immense human (*anthropo*) imprint on lithosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere. The conclusion underlying the term is that *Homo sapiens* is a species that has become a super-agent in the geological sense. The invention of the combustion engine by James Watt in 1784 can be perceived as a symbolic beginning of the Anthropocene, since it is followed by the industrial revolution accompanied by carbon dioxide emissions and fossil fuels combustion. Human presence on Earth alters and changes a lot of crucial parameters of our planetary systems (soil, biodiversity, biogeochemical cycles of the Earth, etc.). Therefore, one can perceive those changes as dispersion or disintegration of global harmony.

3. The Anthropocene – a scene of human presence.

Writing about the Anthropocene, Davies highlights: “It is a recent addition to the vocabulary of environmental politics: it was coined, or at least it came to something like widespread notice, only at the end of the twentieth century. But since then it has prospered in a remarkable way. In some academic circles it has lately become a much-used and fashionable term. In the most advanced circles of all it has already gone on to the next stage and is considered rather worn-out and declassified. Among both enthusiasts and the skeptics, the word has been tossed into debate much more frequently than it has been explained or defined. More often than not, it has been used without the intention of any very specific allusion to the work of the stratigraphers (...)”⁶

That is why it is important to note that the Anthropocene is not just a passing fashion to think of a planetary catastrophe within the humanities. Indeed, there exists a climate of fatigue with the word or rather the concept.

And yet there are many names given to describe the epoch: postnaturalism, eco-Marxism, Capitalocene, eco-catastrophism, ecomodernism, state without

⁶ Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, University of California Press, 2016 p. 6.

precedence, tipping point, no-analogue world, loss of Nature, climatic apartheid, irrevocable shift, irreversibility, Gaia, metabolic shift, climatic divide, environmental human rights, or climatic debt. Names may differ, but the gravity of the situation has to be understood. Carolyn Merchant states: “Climate change is the most critical issue for the long-term well-being of humanity in the twenty-first century. Scientists now broadly agree that anthropogenic or human-driven inputs exacerbate climate change and that a wide range of strategies to manage its effects are possible. But bringing the implications of global warming and potential resolutions to the American public requires the collaboration not only of scientists but also of humanists.”⁷

In 2016, the Anthropocene was defined as an epoch of active human interference in geological evolution processes of the Earth. What do we really mean by the term “epoch” in geology? Jeremy Davies explains in *The Birth of the Anthropocene*: “A geological epoch is a midsize section of the planet’s history. Students of the earth’s biology and physical processes are now increasingly persuaded that the planetary system as a whole is undergoing an epoch-level transition. Earth’s atmosphere, oceans, rocks, plants, and animals are experiencing changes great enough to mark the ending of one epoch and the beginning of another. The present environmental crisis is epochal in this particular, specialized sense. It is hard to comprehend, but if we regard current environmental changes as the birth pangs of a new epoch, and if we give that epoch its geological time, in the long history of the earth itself, we might start to make sense of what we are facing. Recognizing what is now ending and what is beginning can help us respond to the predicament of living in the fissures between one epoch and another. The new division of geological time has already been given a name: the Anthropocene.”⁸

4. What art has to do with it

Nicolas Bourriaud seemed to have quite a few ideas about it. In *The Exform*,⁹ he indicates the importance of making analogies between waste, repression, exclusion and expulsion, which shows connections between ecology, different artistic and cultural ideologies, and psychoanalysis. The term “exform” relates to a border, a tipping point or an intersection where negotiations of what is a product and what constitutes part of waste take place. The exform is

⁷ Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability*, Yale University Press 2020.

⁸ Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, Univeristy of California Press 2016, p. 2.

⁹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, transl. Erik Butler, Verso 2016.

part of the process of deciding what to include and what to exclude. What is crucial in this aesthetic proposition is the key position of the idea of rubbish, waste and exclusion juxtaposed with the idea of production in the dynamics of culture and art.

Exclusion, psychological repression and projection constitute key terms for the understanding of the contemporary world, including the art world. Bourriaud gives examples of different artworks and plays with the idea of waste. It can be altered by regaining products that seem redundant and would add to piles of garbage that started to appear among Western imagery on book covers, exhibited photographs and works of art. Altering the destiny of a given product is in art's power, just like putting forward images that make the necessity of change, transition that has to be imagined, visible and perceivable. Mark Bould starts his book with the nightmarish description:

“Imagine the world to come.

Imagine we carry on doing too little too late. Imagine we continue to set inadequate emissions targets with no real intention of meeting them, and then keep right on missing them. The parts per million atmospheric CO₂ relentlessly increase. Temperatures rise [...]” He then goes on to tell us: “The last of the glaciers melt. We lose polar icecaps, first in the north and then, inexorably, the south. The oceans rise and, since water expands as it warms, rise still more. Low-lying islands disappear. So do the densely populated river deltas. Coastlines retreat. Hundreds of millions flee the inundation. Hundreds of millions more stay behind and die.

Elsewhere deserts form, and agriculture collapses. Daytime temperatures kill. Those who can, take flight. More refugees. Endless border violence to keep them out. Skirmishes, then wars, over food and fresh water.”¹⁰

Art, literature and philosophy deal with the “imagine” aspect. It makes imagination work and focus. Art has the power to act against lethargy which surrounds issues related to ecology and the Anthropocene. If we only keep on describing the epoch as one of irreversible losses, passivity and denial, the will to act may be weakened at its core. Ewa Bińczyk writes: “Lethargy (from Greek *lethargia*) is defined as apathy – a state that impedes our ability for cognition and action. Undoubtedly, in the context of climate politics, we seem to be suffering from lethargy. Despite the Paris climate agreement signed in 2015

¹⁰ Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*, Verso, London 2021, p. 2

by UN member states, implementing a low-carbon economy seems unrealistic. Disappointment and helplessness describe the condition of environmentalism at the time of systemic planetary crises.”¹¹

The slogan “art for art’s sake” still resonates with artists when they face the necessity to compromise their art for the sake of some ideology, but this time the challenge of planetary life is a different stake. It is not about a political ideology that needs the scaffolding of art, but life in general. Therefore, it appeals to the sensibility of artists and poets.

The need to create in order to show the dangers of the Anthropocene does not come from exterior pressure, but rather from an inner urge to take action and keep hope burning. Hope is not enough, but the transition cannot take place without it.

5. Conclusion – Unity and Dispersion in Art

Is the dispersion of narratives a problem? Do unity and what follows totality/wholeness pose a danger?

In the 19th century, the need to connect human experience and some narratives found one of its hubs in the idea of synesthesia. Human sensual experience was admired as a certain whole – totality that can guarantee integrity. Reflections connected with the notion of synesthesia became naturally connected with the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. A search for unity even within plurality is related to the overall history of humanism.

As for the latter question posed at the beginning of the section, it seemed so to some postmodernist thinkers. In my book *Conducting the waves. Thinking in visual and musical avantgardes*, where I try to tackle some problems related to the banishment of certain concepts from contemporary philosophy, I suggest that “Totalitarianisms influenced the philosophical understanding of the whole (let’s think about the etymology of the terms totality, *totalité*), and through philosophy they influenced the arts. Totalitarianism consists in privileging the whole over a part, and is therefore understood as the domination of all over individuals, antinomy of individualism. The aspect of dialogue, as well as effort to see what connects through differences, was less clear in the recent fate of the concept of universality, or unity and totality, than negative connotations associated with these notions. Threats related to totalization, which obscured care for the individual, have come to the fore. One of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, Emmanuel Levinas, although in favour

¹¹ Ewa Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2018, p. 324.

of certain manifestations of metaphysics, remained a great enemy of totalizing processes.”¹²

Today, differences or a difference (singular), particularities attract more care and attention from researchers than similarities or any universal tendencies. As stated above, it can be mostly understood as a reaction to totalizing tendencies experienced before and often also connected with art – as is the case with *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the idea of a total work of art. The result of such special care for difference and particularity is, among others, dispersion of discourses and a lack of syntheses.

Michael Kelly and Susan Buck-Morss also perceive the tendency to reject universality in contemporary art and philosophy. In *Sexed Universals in Contemporary Art*, Penny Florence declares that there exists an anti-universalist tendency which she frames as “universality of non-universality”.

How much of this dispersion is still due to the World Wars and how much due to the ecological crisis, or simply human nature? Although important to ask, these questions are probably impossible to answer. Nevertheless, if I were to reply to the question where unity is now, I would suggest that it may reside in this ecological strive to confront, challenge and help that is often fought through art, as if art was becoming the domain of some new utopian possibilities for change again. At least this is what we can observe at some exhibitions taking place today – from Rajkowska’s show on trees in Zachęta to Palais de Tokyo and its exhibition *Reclamer la terre*. The term “exform” is also made visible and tangible to us through such artworks as sculptures and fountains made of rubbish bins.

“She that should all parts to reunion bow,
 She that had all magnetic force alone,
 To draw, and fasten sund’red parts in one;
 She whom wise nature had invented then
 When she observ’d that every sort of men
 Did in their voyage in this world’s sea stray,
 And needed a new compass for their way;
 She that was best and first original
 Of all fair copies, and the general
 [...]
 She to whom this world must it self refer,
 As suburbs or the microcosm of her,

¹² Anna Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, *Dyrygując falom. Myślenie w awangardach wizualno-muzycznych*, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2019, p. 50.

She, she is dead; she's dead: when thou know'st this,
Thou know'st how lame a cripple this world is"¹³

What kind of relationships may John Donne mean when he says: "Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot"? It may seem that the ones that emerge are incoherent or that they spring from a completely new source. However, in subsequent lines it turns out that the problem lies in narcissism¹⁴ or actually something even better mapped – the idea of being exceptional and special ("For every man alone thinks he hath got to be a phoenix, and that then can be none of that kind, of which he is, but he.") leads to the impossibility of any comparison, any common ground, or any larger *genus*. What is left is only *differencia specifica*.

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¹³ John Donne, *ibidem*.

¹⁴ As for narcissism, examples of such a diagnosis of the cultural condition of the West arose in late 19th century. The term was coined in 1898 by Havelock Ellis, an essayist and physician, and understood by him as a mental disorder.

POZA ZASADĄ JEDNOŚCI (streszczenie)

W niniejszym artykule refleksja nad jednością i rozproszeniem skupia się na momencie, w którym projekcja ludzkiej kondycji na tkanę świata stała się widoczna w sposób najbardziej wymierny i niebezpieczny dla planety, co rozrywa wizję jedności ludzkich dążeń. Dlatego owe niebezpieczeństwa zostały omówione w rozdziałach: 2. „Zniszczenie”, 3. „Antropocen – scena obecności człowieka”. W części 4. „Co sztuka ma z tym wspólnego” analizuję związki między niektórymi praktykami sztuki współczesnej a opisaniem wcześniej szerokim kontekstem, m.in. z wykorzystaniem koncepcji „eksformy” Bourriauda.

W artykule pojawiają się następujące pytania: Jaka część rozproszenia nadal jest spowodowana wojnami światowymi? Ile wynika z kryzysu ekologicznego? Czy jedności można poszukiwać w artystycznym dążeniu ekologicznym, aby stawić czoła wyzwaniu.

Słowa klucze: jedność, koherencja, dezintegracja, destrukcja

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