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Art in the Time of Pandemic: Three Terms

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With a growing awareness that going "back to normal is impossible because normal was the problem", the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic generated some of the most engaging reflections in the art world. Some of them were meant to mark deep breaks with the (more or less recent) past; some others stressed tendencies that had already emerged in the last decades, but that the pandemic helped reveal in their full significance. I will attempt to sketch three attitudes, that can perhaps be captured by three *terms*: *essential*, *original*, *nonhuman*. They are mere signposts that I consider significant, among many possible others. They point to regions with fuzzy borders, partially overlapping. The first term refers to the attempt at rediscovering "the essential" value or function of art, behind the glamorous merry-go-round of the art-world; the second one, at creating a short circuit between the most ancient ("original") artistic-technological human operations and some forms of contemporary art, both basic and technologically advanced; the third one, at finding a legitimation "that lies beyond the human".

Keywords: Art and coronavirus, Art and the Anthropocene, Art and the Nonhuman, Contemporary art and the Paleolithic, Richard Powers, Jerry Saltz.

"Despite widespread fear of an influenza epidemic, we are not living in a viral age. Thanks to immunological technology, we have already left it behind" (Han, 2010; Engl. transl. 2015, p. 6)[1]. Written by a brilliant and popular philosopher ten years ago, today this statement sounds like a bad

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[1] Here is the opening paragraph of Han's book from which I quote: "Every age has its signature afflictions. Thus, a bacterial age existed; at the latest, it ended with the discovery of antibiotics. Despite widespread fear of an influenza epidemic, we are not living in a viral age. Thanks to immunological technology, we have already left it behind. From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first century is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons. Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (Han, 2015, p. 6).

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joke. Yet, even though Byung-Chul Han's purpose was not primarily to promote a certain mythical idea of the omnipotence of science and technology, but to dismiss Roberto Esposito's socio-political "immunological" paradigm as outdated, his rhetorical posture is emblematic of a certain widespread style of public discourse. Instead of limiting himself to argue against Esposito's paradigm, and for "his" alternative paradigm of "burnout syndrome" in all its forms, he wanted to outwit every other competitor and to emerge through a sensational – and, alas, rather futile – claim: as if a neurological overload were incompatible with a viral epidemic or a bacterial infection. Han's aim was to feed the public with our age's "signature affliction". An affliction that, by the way, had been already analyzed several times (starting at least from Ehrenberg, 1998), but which still lacked his signature, his personal branding.

Unfortunately, this widespread attitude belongs to the logic of competitiveness that generates the very psycho-neurological disturbs that Han aimed to expose. What is worse is that this attitude "infects" more easily the young minds who look at such popular, and often talented, "maîtres à non penser" as examples to be imitated. Indeed, in certain circles, "philosophical" catchwords are launched in order to occupy what is deemed to be a gap in the market of ideas. And if there is no actual gap – because the idea captures a phenomenon that is already evident or that could be put beside other social phenomena without claiming exclusiveness –, the gap must be created with grand, authoritarian, and unwarranted assertions. Instead of suggesting tentative hypotheses, or well meditated, complex reflections aimed to prompt further reflection in the reader, some philosophers pay homage to what the market (of ideas) requires. Some authors seem to be at ease with that, even when they are advertising themselves as fierce opponents of the very logic they show to comply with[2].

The Covid-19 epidemic is a global trauma that has immediately generated strong reactions, also among philosophers, artists, and art critics. Some of their reactions have been as peremptory as Han's statement, some others more cautious and interlocutory. In what follows I will not attempt to launch new catchwords, nor to offer an in-depth analysis of contemporary arts' landscape. I would rather try to propose a tentative and incomplete list of the most interesting responses to the shock of this pandemic that have emerged in the art world and add some critical reflections on them. Thus, no prophecies, no sensational slogans, no "signature phenomena", but only an invitation to elaborate further on our predicament from the angle of an aesthetic reflection.

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[2] Graham Harman is unapologetically explicit about similar marketing operations. I don't find his arguments convincing, but at least one knows what one is dealing with: "The brand is not merely a degenerate practice of brainwashing consumerism, but a universally recognized method of conveying information while cutting through information *clutter*. Coining specific names for philosophical positions helps orient the intellectual public on the various available options while also encouraging untested permutations. If the decision were mine alone, not only would the name 'speculative realism' be retained, but a logo would be designed for projection on PowerPoint screens, accompanied by a few signature bars of smoky dubstep music. It is true that such practices would invite snide commentary about 'philosophy reduced to marketing gimmicks'. But it would hardly matter, since attention would thereby be drawn to the works of speculative realism, and its reputation would stand or fall based on the inherent quality of these works, of which I am confident" (Harman, 2011, p. 21).

Nobody knows where this crisis will lead us, although it seems probable that we[3] will have to face similar global emergencies in the (near) future, linked to our age, variously called Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene. With a growing awareness that going "back to normal is impossible because normal was the problem", the first weeks of the pandemic generated some of the most engaging reflections in the art world. Some of them were meant to mark deep breaks with the (more or less recent) past; some others stressed tendencies that had already emerged in the last decades, but that the pandemic helped reveal in their full significance.

I will attempt to sketch three attitudes, that can perhaps be captured by three *terms*[4]: *essential*, *original*, *nonhuman*. They are mere signposts that I consider significant, among many possible others. They point to regions with fuzzy borders, partially overlapping. The first term refers to the attempt at rediscovering "the essential" value or function of art, behind the glamorous merry-go-round of the art-world; the second one, at creating a short circuit between the most ancient ("original") artistic-technological human operations and some forms of contemporary art, both basic and technologically advanced; the third one, at finding a legitimation "that lies beyond the human" (Powers, 2018, p. 218).

Essential

As is well known, in the last three or four decades, contemporary art, particularly contemporary *visual* art, has undergone an incredible global expansion, unthinkable until the Seventies. Although still perceived as "difficult" or, alternatively, as "fraud" by many, contemporary art is not a marginal phenomenon in the touristic industry of big and small cities: new dedicated bi- tri- or quadrennials, spectacular museums, fancy fairs, galleries, schools, parks, public and private "events", not to mention staggering auctions and financial gambling have proliferated everywhere. As it happened in relation to other spheres of life, also within the art world there have been some people who have been asking for less, who questioned the supposed necessity of this incessant activity, along with its compulsory high level of consumption, near-ubiquity, global social presence. In an article published on *Frieze* just before the Covid-19 outbreak, followed by a volume on the same line, critic Kyle Chayka (2019, 2020) asked whether the art world could "kick its addiction to flying". The figure of the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, one of the most popular art globetrotter, is emblematic: "Obrist is the latest patron saint of art-world travel, his reliquary a rolling-suitcase. In a 2014 *New Yorker* profile, D.T. Max recounted that the curator had made 2,000 trips over the past 20 years, and traveled for '50 of the previous 52 weekends'. (All in, we could say he's responsible for at least 6000 square meters of melted Arctic ice)" (Chayka, 2019). Flying is, of course, just an epitome of the glamourous frenzy of the artworld. And it is no chance that airplane travel has been the subject of many artists as well. To name but a few: Andrea Gursky, *Düsseldorf Airport* (1985), Peter Fischl and David Weiss, *800 Views of Airports* (1987-2012), Wolfgan Tillmans, *Concorde* (1997), not to mention contemporary music (starting at least from Brian Eno's *Music for airports*, 1978, to our days). By exposing this nefarious "addiction", Chayka means to question the very art world he is describing. He is aware that the art world is made also by human relationships and physical encounters, "not just because of the cosmopolitan ethic, but to stay competitive in the creative marketplace", and adds the "deeper reason" concerning "the nature of art itself, particularly in the digital era, when the Benjaminian aura seems scarcer than ever" (Chayka, 2019). Yet, he hints at other ways for preserving the auratic leftovers of art, for re-localizing "art through curation, without sacrificing the global culture that we prize": from the proposal launched by Obrist himself ("work take the form of a set of instructions that can be restaged by other artists who are conveniently accessible") to Dougald Hine's idea "for a pan European theatre troupe that traveled only by land" (Chayka, 2019).

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[3] A "we" that, of course, is homogenous only in its species-specific features, but that is heterogeneous in many other relevant respects.

[4] Cf. Foster (2015, p. 7): "I speak of terms because the ones taken up here [...] do not qualify as paradigms [...] Of course, they are not the sole terms possible for this period". The terms proposed in this article are more tentative and generic than those explored by Foster in his book. They are provisional attempts to organize the enormous amount of reactions provoked in the art world by the pandemic.

In *The New York Times*, the art critic Jason Farago acknowledges a similar picture of contemporary art ("a round-the-globe, round-the-clock industry") and considers the grounding of flight as disruptive as the closure of museums. He recalls the ominous warning repeated in the last years by the artist and philosopher Adrian Piper, "Everything will be taken away" (a series of works which appeared in many formats at the Venice Biennale in 2015, when she was awarded the Golden Lion), and applies it to the loss of lives, careers, institutions, practices, traditions. But his suggestion regarding a long-term mandate for artists who will have survived the pandemic is perhaps more elemental than *essential*, i.e., "to reestablish painting, photography, performance and the rest as something that can still be charged with meaning, and still have global impact, even when we're not in motion" (Farago, 2020).

If Chayka's call for the *essential* in the form of an overall "minimalism" was already well articulated before the shock of Coronavirus (Chayka, 2020), Jerry Saltz's response to it has been more significant and symptomatic. Saltz is perhaps less popular than Obrist, but much more an art world insider than Chayka – being a very active critic on prestigious magazines and journals, Pulitzer Prize for art criticism in 2018, indefatigable Instagram communicator, visiting critic at Yale, Columbia, and Chicago University. In an article written for *the New York Magazine* on the 20th of March 2020, just a week after his last visits to some galleries in Chelsea – when the Covid-19 had started to hit New York City –, Saltz worries about "small art scenes [that] will be economically wiped out". Not only that: "If buyers aren't buying and people aren't seeing art, teaching jobs are suspended and employment curtailed, what happens to the already fragile financial support systems artists depend on?". His answer is not only rather optimistic but essentializes and eternalizes art, even if everything else changes: "Art will go on. It always has. All we know is that everything is different; we don't know how, only that it is. The unimaginable is now reality" (Saltz, 2020a). The art disparagers who demonize "art as frivolous, formal, gratuitous, useless, decadent" don't understand that art is "all of these things", but is it also what makes us humans, in a Darwinian sense, "the most adaptive to change":

> That's the rub. Art's primary metaphysical building block *is* that which has never been imagined. This is why I can say – and know – that art will go on. The reason is that art is an advanced abstract operating system devised for imagining the unseen, gleaning the group mind, a tool to invent new protocol, experience rapture from form, explore consciousness, map reality, create constellations of unspoken communication that echo across millennia – things that never change but that are different every time we look at the same work. This is because art is the ability to embed the unimaginable in material. Creativity is a survival strategy; it's in every bone in our bodies, and always has been (Saltz, 2020a).

Shocked by the impact of the pandemic, in his passionate article Saltz wants to recover what he considers the authentic, essential, and eternal value and function of the activity he has dedicated his life to. It is a genuine and appreciable effort to point to the essential. Beyond the glamour and the atmosphere of "exclusiveness", and perhaps by idealizing a bit what art was before "greed became form"[5] (Saltz, 2020b), he spells out the essential nature of art by listing human abilities (imagining what has never been imagined, embedding the unimaginable in material), adaptive resources (exercising creativity), unusual and intense experiences (experiencing rapture from form, discovering different things in the identical over time), complex cognitive-operational functions (inventing new protocols, exploring consciousness, drawing a map of reality) and social functions (gleaning the collective mind, creating constellations of unspoken communications that echo across millennia). These are all suggestive formulas, and each of them could be made less elliptical, losing perhaps some of its charm, but gaining in conceptual articulation. The problem of this ardent defense of art, though, lies elsewhere. On the one hand, each one of these performances is probably attributable, with some adjustments, not only to every work of art or artistic practice that we admire and that captures us but to many other things and activities, from mathematics to shamanic practices, from philosophy to scientific research, from political action to religious worship. That is, every occasion in which a certain human activity or practice lets an aesthetic condition of sense emerge in the foreground, as an inevitable reference to experience in its indeterminate totality.

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[5] Saltz attributes this calembour to Francesco Bonami, who plays with the title of Harald Szeemann's revered exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (Bern 1969/Venice 2013).

On the other hand, as we all know, “art” in the aesthetic or modern sense of the word is a rather recent phenomenon. A work of art may exhibit exemplarily some of the functions and values listed by Saltz, but it will also be and will remain something contingent, dependent on a historical and geographical context, on social recognition, on material and immaterial culture: something that, for example, has existed as a work of art in the aesthetic sense in which we speak of today only for a handful of centuries, not before a system of arts (the “fine arts”) was established, different from that of the “liberal arts”, which has a much longer history and that has very little to do with our notion of art; something that could be done and appreciated only in a certain era and not in another; something that can gain or lose its meaning or values in different times, places and circumstances. Necessity and contingency, a sense of experience, and cultural meanings of all kinds are closely intertwined in a work or artistic practice. Pointing “only” to the essential and imperishable is illusory. Saltz’s perspective risks charging the so-called “art” with a necessity that pertains to the anthropological-transcendental conditions of possibility of art, as of many other practices. Thus – pandemic or not – what we call “art” or “artistic practices” could lose those values and functions mentioned by Saltz, which could migrate elsewhere (who knows? political action? a new relation with nature? Surprising forms of conviviality? unpredictable ways of re-enchantment? – as claimed by many), while galleries, museums, and other designated places for art could definitely become places for entertainment, refined consumption, technological sensations, social gathering, cocktail bars. Or disappear altogether.

In his reaction to the shock of the pandemic, Saltz assumes that works of art have an eternal essence, an invariable essence that variates its manifestations in time. Even if "we don't know how", because "everything is different", after the pandemic "[a]rt will go on" as "[i]t always has": art's "how" will be different, but "it", in its core identity, will be always the same. Yet, what is constant, invariable – or, better, as constant and invariable as our species can be – are the generic human capabilities listed by Saltz. But "how" they will be used is rather unpredictable and nothing can guarantee that their outcome will be recognizable (new) forms of "art". Unintentionally, I presume, Saltz falls back on the commonsensical and misleading notion of art, which relies on an inadequate classificatory way of thinking. As if, notwithstanding their historical variability, artworks and artistic practices constituted a special class of "things", defined in some way. Yet, as it should be evident by now, all the attempts to formally define art or artworks are doomed to fail, being either wrong or uninformative (cf. Velotti, 2012, pp. 131-140).

Original

The "psychic balm" purportedly offered by "complex forms of beauty" could be provoked, according to Saltz, by works ranging from "the first bead bracelets made in the caves and painted Paleolithic stone axes", to the painting by Hokusai, Matisse, and even Goya. I am sure that Saltz would agree that between Paleolithic stone axes and Matisse there are at most "family resemblances", as there are between Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son* and a cannibalistic rite, which would be misunderstood if assimilated to "art" in the modern aesthetic sense. But what is more important is that we can establish these mere "family resemblances" only because we rely on an idea of art that was not available until the XVIII century (Garroni, 1992): how else could we find resemblances between a rite and a painting, a canvas and a stone ax? There is no "natural" or obvious continuity between "the first bead bracelets" and our modern artistic tradition, but, if anything, our artistic practices could be seen as our bead bracelets and painted stone axes. Being more confused than ever about our human (Anthropocene-)identity, it is as if we are trying to get a clue about ourselves by recognizing our most remote origins in our current practices. While we have no idea of "what is it like to be" a Paleolithic human being (nor, I would say, a contemporary one), we could look at our artistic practices and works as clues into the origin of our species. It is not a new form of primitivism – which would still be a "style" or a "movement" within an artistic tradition –, but an aspiration to bypass the history of art altogether and reconnect or revisit an originating moment.

A few years ago, the British archeologist Colin Renfrew published a book to show that art and archeology have the same task: "I am asserting that the task is the same: this is no analogy. It is to look at the material world that humans have made to make for ourselves some sense out of it", being aware, though, that "the task of putting oneself into the shoes of a prehistoric craftsman or a contemporary sculptor is not really feasible" (Renfrew, 2003, pp. 21-23). The contemporary artists conjured up by Renfrew to substantiate his main thesis are very numerous, from the obvious (in this context) name of Richard Long to other stars like Antony Gormley, Jenny Holzer, Mark Dion, Tony Cragg, William Turnbull, and so forth. Today this trend is expressed and acknowledged in a large range of artistic works and practices: in the *New York Times*, the art critic Seph Rodney (2020) compares "the street art adorning boarded-up storefronts in New York City" to the cave painting of Lascaux.

According to Rodney, the Lascaux paintings would essentially "constitute a public square where a community shared critical knowledge", because "the presence of the bison and the stags, their physical fitness and numbers, their mass migrations would have indicated the onset of plagues or cataclysmic weather systems". This sheer speculation on the function of cave paintings is the basis for the comparison with contemporary street art: "The portraits and discrete stories are not very different from our contemporary forums [...] They tell us about our shared political realities, the people we coexist within social space and the ways in which our stories and fates are tied together" (Rodney, 2020). I am not interested in probing this daring comparison, but only in highlighting its symptomatic value. Both low-tech and high-tech contemporary art forms are often associated with upper Paleolithic productions: as if, in order to account for the current relationship of artistic production with technology, it were necessary to go back to question what makes us human, or to recognize the opening of a new era (the posthuman, the Anthropocene, etc.). Artists, philosophers, scholars, and "theorists" of various kind seem to feel this need in different ways:

> Progressive Rocks – associating "prog rock" & the upper Paleolithic. The "progressive" in crisis [...] The real subject is the capacity and function of art [...] Upper Paleolithic as a lens for present, particularly shift from 45,000 years of stability into Neolithic (epoch shift from nomadism to ownership, farming) ownership and finite resources, faltering ecology – now we are hitting the skids with that we are just experiencing the death rattle of the Neolithic?[6]

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[6] These words by the artist Nathaniel Mellors (2018, p. 244) are taken from the catalog of the exhibition, sponsored by Google, *Low Form. Imaginaries and Visions in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. With Erkka Nissinsen, Mellors represented Finland at the 57th Venice Biennale with a project, *The Aalto Native*, taken up in this MAXXI exhibition under

writes for example the English artist Nathaniel Mellors in the margin of one of his works, while in the careful reading of the immersive virtual reality installation by Alejandro Iñárritu, *Carne y Arena*, Andrea Pinotti saw an invitation "to re-read the history of images as a whole, going back to the immersive environments of the Paleolithic caves" (Pinotti, 2018, p. 238). This analogy was already remarked by Richard Powers, one of the best explorers of humanity's changing view of herself. In his novels, one can often find a sharp and complex view of this ongoing process. *Plowing the Dark* (Powers, 2000), for example, weaves together two narrative threads: one of an American teacher locked (and surely "immersed") in a Lebanese prison for years, the other the construction of a VR "Cavern" at the "Realization Lab" (RL, as for "Real Life"?) in Seattle. As Mark C. Taylor writes in his attentive reading of the novel, "for latter-day demiurges, these codes create a virtual reality chamber that is the contemporary version of Lascaux":

> Lim came through early one evening, agitated from reading a new book on prehistoric art.
>
> *You have to read this. The author claims that the Upper Paleolithic caves were the first VR.*
>
> *Sure.* Spiegel twisted his palm in the air. *What else can you call them?*
>
> *No. Literally. Theater-sized, total-immersion staging chambers where they'd drag initiates by torchlight. The shock of the supernatural sound-and-light show supposedly altered the viewer's consciousness.* Lim stopped, mazed by the idea. *Can you imagine? Catching your first ever glimpse of images, flickering out of pitch-darkness. Like nothing you've ever seen. Your deepest mental illusions made real.*
>
> Adie held up her hand to stop the stream, until she could improvise a bridge across it. *You're saying that cave art begets all this? She waved to include the whole RL. That Lascaux starts a chain reaction that leads to...*?
>
> *I'm saying that art explodes at exactly the same moment as tool-based culture. That cave pictures prepared the leap, after a million and a half years of static existence. That pictures were the tool that enabled human liftoff, the Ur-tech that planted the idea of a separate symbolic existence in the mind of –*
>
> *Oh Jesus.*
>
> (Powers, 2000, pp. 129-130)

"Total-immersion": in the last decade, there has been virtually no exhibition press-release that has relinquished to mention the immersive character of the show. Immersivity seems to have become the new "promise of happiness" that cannot *not* be made to the prospects (visitors/users/pro-

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the title of *Transcendental Accidents (The Aalto Natives)*. This is a one-channel mixed media video that tells a sort of founding myth of Finland and the mission of two deities – the talking egg Gebb and the man with a box instead of the head, Atum – who come back millennia later to verify how civilization has developed.

sumers). Unless it becomes the very analogous of confinement itself[7], as in Powers' novel second narrative thread.

Of course, there are different ways of conceiving of "immersivity": from touristic-sensational attractions (the "Caravaggio Experience", the "Sistine Chapel Immersive Show", and the like) to much more ambitious and refined projects (from James Turrell to Laurie Anderson, from Hsin-Chien Huang to Alejandro Iñárritu, to name just a few artists who are able to *inquire* into immersivity).

From my point of view, immersivity has a peculiar ambiguity: is it a way to maximize the power of an artwork – our being "possessed" by it – or to offer a spectacular surrogate for our incapacity to feel our being "always already" immersed in our real experience? Is it a mode of displaying and revealing our ways of being immersed in the real world, or a symptom of our perception of alienation from it? How important, in these "immersive" experiences, is the awareness of being in any case within a fictional environment, within a type of frame different from traditional frames, but still a frame distinct from reality and requiring a reflective awareness, and how much instead is immersivity a search for a passive and regressive illusion, that of living in a re-enchanted world? Re-enchanted by way of bypassing our modernity, our accumulated historical awareness, with a leap in our ancestral past, on the threshold of our humanity?

Nonhuman

By "nonhuman" I don't mean to hint here primarily at the broad galaxy of reflections on our hybridization with technology, or at the rejection of traditional dualism (human/animal, animate/inanimate, male/female, etc.)[8]. I am rather referring to the various and multiple attempts to find a nonhuman "something" that can help us making sense of our experience. Making sense of experience implies feeling that what happens has an understandable connection with the rest of it in its elusive totality, with the space of accumulated experience and with the horizon of expectation. Our recurrent plunging into nonsense, in the absurd, and our suffering from it, is just what confirms the inevitability of this claim. But while this claim implies a certain control over our experience, *it cannot be satisfied by relying solely on what we can control.* Autonomy is not enough for making sense of what we do and live (cf. Rosa, 2016).

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[7] In her "Reflections from the Cave", the architect Lydia Xynogala writes that, during her confinement in her studio-attic, she scanned the surfaces of it, and out of this slow process of scanning she composed a new space, "a cave of sorts, made of artificial surfaces; stalactites and stalagmites of time. The period spent in confinement resonates with the slow process of cave-making" (Xynogala, 2020).

[8] dOCUMENTA (13), curated by Carolyn Kristov-Bakargiev, tackled a broad spectrum of nonhuman artistic, scientific, and philosophical perspectives. Besides her essays in the exhibition catalogs (the most pertinent in this context was biblically titled *The Book of Books*), Kristov-Bakargiev surveyed the whole scope of practices that address "a sort of 'humbleness of human involvement'" (in Kristov-Bakargiev, 2014).

It seems as if "we", as a species, are deeply disappointed by ourselves, and are desperately looking for a radical "other". Or, to put it in a more articulated way: it seems that the part of humankind that is more objectively responsible for the ecological disaster (economic and climate injustice included) is deeply disappointed by its purportedly universal form of life and is desperately seeking a new image of herself to conform to. The current pandemic is only accelerating this deeply felt, and yet still confused, revision of ourselves. The arts, with their sensitive antennas, are trying to elaborate on this new image in multiple ways.

It is again Richard Powers' voice that is able to capture one significant feature of the nascent image of ourselves that is taking form under the pressure of ecological, economic, sanitary, and societal emergencies. Written before the pandemic, *The Overstory* (2018, Pulizter Prize for fiction 2019) is, among other things, a long and complex fresco of ecological activism. While I am not sure about the literary excellence of this tour de force – somewhere Peter Brooks rightly called Powers a "historian of contemporary society" – I am quite convinced that it is able to let emerge one widespread tendency of our age: the temptation to reduce the necessary reference to an elusive totality to an identifiable nonhuman realm: "We're living at a time when claims are being made for a moral authority that lies beyond the human" (Powers, 2018, p. 218), where the moral authority in question is not a traditional god or creed but the vegetable kingdom: "Are these people really appealing to a new, nonhuman moral order? Or are they just being sentimental about pretty green things?" (Powers, 2018, p. 231). Similar suggestions come also from some excellent biologists, who are becoming very popular (like the Canadian Suzanne Simard – who inspired one of the characters of Powers' *The Overstory* and appears in the documentary *Intelligent Trees* alongside the German forester Peter Wohlleben, or the Italian biologist Stefano Mancuso). The life of trees is often offered as an alternative model for human societies – "What the Fuck Went Wrong with Mankind" (Powers, 2018, p. 529) is the central question of *The Overstory* – with little worries about the disputable assumptions and the dangerous implications involved (e.g., social [interspecific] Darwinism).

Artistic projects and works that explore and elaborate the need for a new image of humans in their relation to other animate and inanimate beings are countless: during these months of lockdown, one could spend every night and day in front of a screen watching online exhibitions and projects dealing with a new relationship with (non)human nature: one could check the 2020 Gwangju Residency Exhibition *Biophilia: A handful* *of earth* ("Biophilia, as holy as it may sound, is the hope for the wounded lives of earth that have been under the threat of the global pandemic and environmental disasters caused by human activities [...] humans are moving forward towards a new change. Human nature of love of life that stems from the sense of awe in the diversity of lives latent in a handful of earth will fill in positive energy that can transform the world.", www.acc.go.kr); or the 2019 Biennale Warszawa, whose press release recited that "The exhibition *Floraphilia. Revolution of Plants* frees the world of plants from the reactionary context of interior design magazines and eco-trends, revealing its emancipatory potential leading to social transformation. The space of Biennale Warsaw will turn into an anarchist laboratory of the revolution-to-come, which will become possible through interspecies exchange" (https://biennalewarszawa.pl); or follow Anselm Franke's project on Animism, supported by artists and participation by influential intellectuals like Bruno Latour (cf. Franke, 2010). At least from the "exhibition-essay" *Iconoclash* (2002) on, Latour has had a long collaboration with Peter Weibel, director of the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, now one of the partner institutions that initiated and coordinate the long term project *Driving the Human (*https://drivingthehuman.com) aimed to tackle the problem, among others, of "how to reorient ourselves in the turbulent time and space of the New Climatic Regime". Not to mention individual exhibitions or performances, combining visual materials, poetry, science, and philosophy – see for example the art project "Dreams of Trees" by the Italian artist Emilio Fantin, a "dramatic exposé of a dream of an Almond tree and a vision of an Olive tree", brought "to life" in "virtual exhibition spaces" by "The Urban Ecological Arts Forum at the Nature of Cities", (https://www.thenatureofcities.com), and the accompanying essay by Andreas Weber, the proponent of a "Poetic of Nature" and a "Biosemiotics" –, or the performance "Reading to Plants" by the poet and conceptual artist Precious Okoyomo, live-streamed in October 2020 in the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt a.M. The list could go on indefinitely. It goes without saying that these heterogeneous projects are all highly symptomatic of a general, although differentiated, global predicament, and that they have, more or less, laudable intentions. What interest here, though, is a more specific aspect that, I think, hovers over all of them: a new search for an absolute which, philosophically, is represented by the generic label "speculative realism".

It is significant that Hal Foster, one of the most influential American art critic, in his reflections on art during the pandemic, evoked the name of the "anti-correlationist" French philosopher Quentin Meilassoux. Meilassoux's speculative tour de force *After Finitude* is not only a fine, if disputable, achievement, but represents maybe better than any other book this new longing for the nonhuman "great outdoors" that many feel would be necessary to make sense of ourselves: "We can now claim to have passed through the correlationist circle – or at least to have broken through the wall erected by the latter, which separated thought from the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether or not it is thought" (Meillassoux, 2006, p. 108). Outside the philosophical circles, it doesn't really matter whether these "great outdoors" are mathematical or temporal, vegetal or inanimate. What it only matters is that they are "in-itself", unencumbered by human presence. For Foster, it is the solitude of art, during the lockdown, that embodies the "great outdoor":

> I can't quite shake the thought that the lockdown relieved art of our looking and talking, though. It is as if that silence were a test run for what Quentin Meillassoux calls "ancestral" time, a time before us or after us – In any case, without us, beyond human finitude. For speculative realists like Meillassoux, we can't get out of our own way philosophically – especially given that, since Kant, the objective world is "correlated" with the subjective mind almost as a matter of course – and they ask us to break this circuit somehow so that the "great outdoors" can be considered as such, as existence apart from us. The lockdown pointed to what this thought experiment might be as an actual condition, particularly if we understand the virus as one more stage in the imminent collapse of the environment as a whole (Foster, 2020).

From a philosophical point of view, it is not clear whether this yearning for the absolute is only paradoxical, contradictory, or a mere psychological need. Even granting that we can relate to something unrelated to humans, shouldn't we ask ourselves what is *our* relation to this speculative endeavor? However, if assessing the dispute between "correlationism" and "speculative realism" can thrill perhaps only some academics, the paradoxical desire to *relate* to an absolute, or to "great outdoors", *unrelated* to humans is probably one of the most deep-felt and enigmatic features of our predicament – exacerbated by the pandemic – that both philosophy and art practices are called to understand.

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