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TKANINA ARTYSTYCZNA
Wobec współczesności

TEXTILE ART
In the face of contemporary times



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu

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Contemporary textile artist, holds an MA degree from the University of Art in Poznań, Poland, and a BA degree from the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Her practice explores the interplay between humans, animals, plants, and environments, utilising collected organic fibers and materials. Employing felting and threading techniques of her own, Kruger delves into theories of post-humanism and new materialism. She has exhibited widely, including a solo exhibition, Hide and Seek at Galerii Design UAP in Poznań, and was awarded with the second merit award in the Barclays Africa L'Atelier Competition, securing her a residency at Sylt Kuns Raum in Germany.

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Nina Kruger

In Plain Sight: Exploring Posthumanism Through Contemporary Textile Art

Prologue

Encountering the Wild: Reflections on Humanity's Relationship with Non-Human Organisms

The aim of this prologue is to set the scene of an embodied posthumanist experience which impacted my perspective on the role of humans in relation to other non-human organisms. The rest of the article illustrates the theories and concepts that have influenced my fiber artworks; it shows how I interact with my surroundings and illuminates the blurred boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and the environment.

During a camping trip to Cape Vidal Nature Reserve on South Africa's East Coast, I realized I was ill-prepared for the wild surroundings. Going into the trip, I was not fully aware of how exposed we would be to the free-roaming animals. The reserve hosts diverse animals, like buffalo, elephants, rhinos, leopards and also the endangered Samango monkey. My fragile tent provided no security, making me feel unprotected in this

dangerous setting. The animals, accustomed to humans, came close to the campsites we used. Samango monkeys stole our food and charged us, leading us to use slingshots for defense. Our safety was further compromised when spotted hyenas and wild boars sniffed through the camp, pushing us to fortify our tents with makeshift structures and alarms. A seemingly innocent camping trip turned into a chapter resembling *Lord of the Flies*.

As our group banded together to fend off the monkeys and protect our campsite, I sensed kinship with ancient ancestors and thought deeply about what their struggle for survival would have been like. I had an embodied experience of the blurred boundaries between different organisms, all competing for resources – a fundamental truth that we often overlook in our modern urban existence. This led me to contemplate more deeply the non-human organisms that I regularly interact with in my everyday life yet often overlook. It also led to reflection on the need for humans to be less of a central figure within the context of the Anthropocene.

The encounter with the animals, and me being a vulnerable animal along with them, was a stark reminder that all organisms and environments should not be taken for granted – as many things often are in the modern world. Furthermore, this experience drew me further into my immediate environment and prompted me to seek out and explore various non-human organisms more intensely.

Introduction

The interplay between theory and my contemporary textile art practice is intricate and multi-faceted. My theoretical inclinations significantly impact decisions about medium, subject matter, and technique, while my practice itself provides a platform for experimenting with organic fibers and materials, enriching my theoretical comprehension. This article offers a glimpse into my Master's degree art practice at UAP, with a spotlight on the utilization of organic materials and textile techniques. It touches on the theory of posthumanism, showing how it addresses the often overlooked human-material relationship in our immediate environments.

Adopting a dual storyline structure, the article explores selected artworks and the experiences that shape them, juxtaposed with an examination of posthumanism, delving into concepts and writings from Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, among others. Furthermore, it explores the processes of observing, collecting, and transforming organic fibers and materials, alongside the textile techniques applied in my practice. This unveils how these approaches align with posthumanism, reflecting the evolution of my practice through a theoretical framework.

While not seeking to establish conclusions about human-non-human relationships, this work explores these connections as they influence my own thoughts and art. It underscores that contemporary textile art dedicated to these theoretical concepts can illuminate overlooked biodiversity, addressing vital contemporary concerns.

Posthumanism in Theory and Practice: Re-evaluating Human Connections with Non-Human Entities and Environments

String

Upon my arrival in Poznań and at the start of my Master's degree journey, I aimed to familiarize myself with my new surroundings by taking daily walks in the area. During one of these strolls, I discovered a *Clematis Virginiana* (*Powojnik Wirginijski*), from which I felt compelled to collect a few specimens to bring to my studio. I conducted a series of practical experiments to explore the textile potential of these plant fibers, employing various felting techniques to create a cloth-like material. This resulted in an artwork entitled *Cloth* (Figure 1).

The objects that emerged from these endeavors left me fascinated yet perplexed as they appeared to blur the line between plant and animal organisms. The plant's fibers had an uncanny resemblance to human or animal hair, and the resulting cloth mimicked the appearance of fur and moss, seemingly alive and continuously growing.

Working with *Clematis Virginiana* plant fibers demanded keen awareness of its life cycle and natural habitat. To sustain year-round experiments, I gathered ample material in autumn, all while ensuring minimal impact on the plant and its environment, prioritizing responsible collections to avoid harm.

The technique employed in creating the cloth piece involved a dry felting method, which, due to the inherent fragility of the plant fibers, necessitated the use of sheep fleece as a binding material. The process entailed laying the fleece over a layer of plant fibers on a sponge sheet, after which the fibers were repeatedly pinched with a felting needle. This is a laborious and meticulous process that aims to join the two materials seamlessly. Once complete, the fused layer was removed from the sponge. However, due to the continuous drying out of the plant fibers, the final piece remains extremely delicate.

My goal through this endeavor is to prompt viewers to pause and contemplate the intricate and nuanced relationship between humans and the organic materials that constitute our world. The theoretical tenets of posthumanism are mirrored in these artworks, which view human relationships with the world as interconnected and non-linear, expanding the

notion of agency, self, and life to include non-human entities like plants, animals and machines. The project serves to underscore the delicate and ephemeral nature of life, while also drawing attention to the extensive potential and variety of materials and organisms that surround us, which are often disregarded or undervalued. I found it surprising that local Polish viewers were unable to recognise the plant used in these pieces, despite its abundant growth in cities across Poland. This emphasized the significance of recognizing and comprehending the intricate connections that exist all around us.

Expanding Human Relationships with the World: Posthumanism in the Works of Haraway, Braidotti, Susen, Costa et al, and Berry

Posthumanism, as explained by Josephine Berry, is a perspective that expands our understanding of human relationships with the world, emphasizing the interconnectedness and non-linearity of such relationships. Unlike traditional views that separate humans from the rest of creation, posthumanism acknowledges that humans are continuously shaping and being shaped by their environment.¹ This conception is echoed by Claudia Lima Costa, Ildney Cavalcanti, and Joan Haran, who highlight the need to expand the notion of agency, self, and life to include non-human entities like animals and machines.²

According to Simon Susen, posthumanism constructs a post-anthropocentric world that challenges the essence of humanity by redefining our relationships with non-human beings and ecosystems. This view emphasizes the connections between humans and non-humans, constructing a world that challenges the very core of what it means to be human. In this sense, the non-human is not limited to animals and plants but can be understood to include all “organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems”.³ Susen complements and expands on Costa et al.’s reflections, arguing that a posthuman world requires a reimagining of our relationship with the world that emphasizes the connections and interdependence between humans and non-humans.

» 1 Josephine Berry, “How to Explain Pictures to a Dying Human: On Art in Expanded Ontologies”, *The Large Glass: Journal of Contemporary Art, Culture and Theory*, no. 27/28, (2019): 7.

» 2 Claudia Lima Costa, Ildney Cavalcanti and Joan Haran, “On the Posthuman”, *Ilha do Desterro – A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies*, (June 2015): 9. <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2017v70n2p9>.

» 3 Simon Susen, “Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?”, *Social Epistemology*, (May 2021): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1893859>.

Donna Haraway, a significant figure in posthumanism, rejects the idea of human superiority and stresses the importance of considering post-human and non-human perspectives while promoting bio-centered equality. Rosi Braidotti, a contemporary feminist philosopher, builds on Haraway's work and suggests the creation of a new kinship system based on emotional ties with non-human entities.⁴

According to Braidotti, Haraway challenges the conventional understanding of the world, which reinforces patriarchal power structures and creates a false dichotomy between nature and culture. Haraway suggests that a community be established that includes non-human agents and is based on empathy, accountability, and recognition. By doing so, Haraway proposes a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of the world which challenges the anthropocentric view.

Both Haraway and Braidotti expand on the posthumanist perspective, emphasizing the importance of considering the connections between humans and non-humans, thus challenging the conventional belief in human centrality. Furthermore, Haraway's ideas resonate with the growing concern for ecological issues and the need for sustainable practices that benefit all beings on Earth. This need for sustainability is a result of the combined effects of globalization and the rise of technology.⁵

Nests

Nests (Figure 2) was created from the leftover twigs of *Clematis Virginiana* that were separated from the hairy fibers as part of the process that produced the felted cloth piece illustrated in Figure 1. The twigs naturally formed a network-like structure resembling a nest. To preserve this structure, they were coated with gelatine, which gave the twigs an abject quality evocative of bodily fluids like saliva, and it enhanced the plant's animalistic or human-like aspect. The nest of twigs is juxtaposed by a ball of my own collected hair.

Upon initiating the collection of *Clematis Virginiana* plant fibers, I embarked on the additional endeavor of collecting my own hair. Through the posthumanist and post-anthropocentric lens, it felt fitting to contribute personally to my archive of fiber materials, rather than relying solely on plant sources for my art practice. However, it is noteworthy that my personal contribution pales in comparison to the substantial volume acquired from plants. The process of producing my own materials was time-con-

» 4 Rosi Braidotti, "Post-human, All too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology", *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no7-8, (December 2006): 199-200 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406069232>

» 5 Braidotti, Rosi, "Posthuman Humanities", *European Educational Research Journal* 12, no. 1, (January 2013): 5. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2304/eeerj.2013.12.1.1>

suming as it involved a daily collection ritual. This meticulous effort resulted in a modest output, characterized by simplistic ball-shaped formation. Due to the substantial time investment in acquiring this material, I developed a strong sense of attachment and protectiveness towards my contribution. Consequently, I refrained from excessive experimentation, fearing any potential wastage, which further contributes to the overall simplicity of the final presentation. Interestingly, this poses a contradiction to posthumanist and post-anthropocentric thinking as I observe a subtle hierarchical division between the collected plant materials and my own contribution. It is worth acknowledging and questioning this disparity and being aware of the pitfalls in my own interpretations and the findings they lead to.

Furthermore, it is my intention to establish meaningful parallels between the structures and shapes manifested in plant, animal, and human materials, with the objective of fostering a heightened appreciation across these distinct categories. This endeavor seeks to remind one of the equitable standing of humanity within this taxonomy, reinforcing the notion of equality in these realms.

Revisiting Posthumanism in the Anthropocene: Theoretical Debates and Ethical Implications in the Context of Ecological Crises and Technological Advancements

While theorists like Haraway and Bruno Latour made significant contributions to posthumanism in the 1980s, recent studies have observed a surge in posthumanism. This uptake is seen as a response to various crises affecting society: economic, political, cultural, and ecological. Costa et al. argue that it is important to position these issues within the context of the Anthropocene, which is characterized by the significant impact of human activities on the planet's health and sustainability.⁶

Furthermore, Braidotti expands on this by emphasizing that the challenges of the Anthropocene crisis are compounded by two factors: the rapid pace of technological progress and the worsening of economic and social disparities. She notes that this results in a multifaceted and conflict-prone environment.

While some liberal thinkers express concern over the role of and consequences for humans as a result of these technological advances and societal issues, Braidotti, as a posthumanist, welcomes the idea of displacing the centrality of the human. She sees the advantages of such an evolution and urges the development of new ideas and terminologies that can address the current situation and map out future directions.⁷

» 6 Claudia Lima Costa, et al. *On the Posthuman*, 9.

» 7 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Humanities*, 6.

Braidotti argues that simply acknowledging the existence of the Anthropocene is not enough: we require more innovative and imaginative thinking to address the current crises. She calls for renewed faith in the cognitive and political significance of creativity. As such, it is necessary to explore new and innovative ways of thinking and to reframe our understanding of the world, ourselves, and our relationship with technology in order to navigate this complex and multifaceted situation.⁸

Justyna Stępień's perspective on the Anthropocene crisis and the limitations of the anthropocentric model of knowledge complements the ideas put forth by Costa et al. and Braidotti. Stępień argues that the traditional anthropocentric model of knowledge endorses the exploitation of the non-human and strengthens the mechanisms that regulate institutional knowledge. In order to restore the ethical balance, she suggests that the 'natureculture' material continuum must be recognized, and the position of the human must be reconsidered. Instead of eliminating humans, we must reassess our relationship with the world to recognize the interdependent relationship between humans and nature.⁹ This perspective aligns with the views of Costa et al. and Braidotti in acknowledging the complex processes at work in our world and the need for innovative and imaginative thinking to address the current situation and map out future directions.

Furthermore, in social theory literature, there are shared concerns about the future of humanity and its humanist legacy. Stępień comments on a 2019 publication by Braidotti and Matthew Fuller (*The Post-Humanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences*), arguing that our current condition cannot simply be described as 'humanity' due to various factors, including the growing number of computational systems, security threats, new biomedical forms, and the increasingly severe ecological damage. The emergence of these factors has led to new and unexpected consequences that challenge the existing human-centered paradigm. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the anthropocentric perspective and adopt new terminologies and ideas that can address the current situation.¹⁰

Overall, the perspectives of Costa et al., Braidotti and Stępień converge in their recognition of the urgent need for a reassessment of the human relationship with ecology and the importance of innovative and imaginative thinking in order to navigate the complex challenges of the Anthropocene.

» 8 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Humanities*, 6.

» 9 Justyna Stępień, *Posthuman and Nonhuman Entanglements in Contemporary Art and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 4.

» 10 Justyna Stępień, *Posthuman and Nonhuman Entanglements in Contemporary Art and the Body*, 4.

Conclusion

My fiber art practice is intertwined with theory in a multifaceted manner, notably shaping my choices in medium, subject, and technique. While pursuing my Master's degree at UAP, I delved into posthumanism and aligned my art-making with it. This fusion of theory and practice emphasized critical engagement with contemporary ecological matters.

Employing a dual narrative structure, this article connects theory and art practice, spotlighting the often-overlooked biodiversity I noticed in my surroundings. The included artworks challenge conventional ideas of agency and life, reflecting the interconnectedness between non-human organisms. Notably, the perspectives of key theorists like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti are mentioned.

While this article doesn't assert conclusions, it illustrates how complex theories enrich artistic understanding. It showcases how posthumanism has elevated and reshaped my textile art practice, fostering appreciation for the non-human realm. In this exploration, I emphasize the significance of theoretical research in contemporary textile art, illustrating its potential to explore pressing contemporary issues. ●

Abstract

This paper delves into my contemporary textile art practice, tracing its evolution through the lens of posthumanism. By intertwining theoretical concepts with practical work, the dual narrative structure of this exploration allows readers to discern meaningful connections. The prologue sets the stage by recounting a transformative camping trip in South Africa, which profoundly shaped my comprehension of these themes and influenced my artistic approach. Moreover, the significance of the rich biodiversity encompassing organic fibers and materials within my immediate environment is underscored, emphasizing how textile art can serve as a means to draw attention to this often overlooked aspect. Employing techniques such as dry felting and threading, I endeavored to highlight the interconnectedness of non-human organisms while simultaneously challenging conventional notions of agency and life.

Through this exploration, my work aims to emphasize the potential of art as a catalyst for raising awareness of pressing contemporary issues, while also illuminating how grappling with intricate theories throughout the art-making process fosters deeper understandings of both art and theory. Although refraining from drawing explicit conclusions, the paper suggests that engaging with complex theories during the creative process can enhance comprehension of both theory and art. Additionally, the paper delves into personal and artistic contexts, objectives and methods.

Keywords:

contemporary textile art, posthumanism, new materialism, organic materials, fibre art, theory and art practice

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