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# POSTHUMAN AND NONHUMAN ENTANGLEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE BODY

JUSTYNA STĘPIEŃ



# Posthuman and Nonhuman Entanglements in Contemporary Art and the Body

Disclosing the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman bodies, understood here as more/than/human entanglements, this book makes a crucial intervention into the field of contemporary artistic studies, exploring how art can conceptualize material boundaries of entangled beings/doings.

Drawing on critical posthumanist and new materialist thought, in this book, nonhumans become subjects of ethics, aesthetics, and politics that produce equally relevant meanings. Designed to include multiple artistic perspectives and forms of expression, which range from sculptures to bio-art and performative practices, the book argues that we are entangled with other organisms around us not only by our socio-cultural connections but predominately by the transformations that we all undergo with the world's materiality. Thus, the artistic works discussed do not merely reflect the world but transform it, offering solutions for practising alternative ethical values and acting better with and for the world.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, cultural studies, media studies, body studies, performance studies, animal studies, and environmental studies.

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Justyna Stępień

Cover image: Cover image designed by Zofia Mackiewicz, Łódź , 2021.

First published 2022

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-032-10408-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-10610-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-21620-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003216209

Typeset in Sabon

by Taylor & Francis Books

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# Acknowledgments

This book has benefited from numerous conversations and critical engagements at conferences, seminars, and workshops with thoughtful and inspiring scholars worldwide. I am grateful for all these inspiring and thought-provoking encounters. I wish I could thank them all by name. I am particularly grateful to Helena Hunter, Marie-Eve Levasseur, Mara Johanna Kölmel, mirko nikolić and Milos Trakilović of Posthuman Art and Research Group (aka. Dori.O), with whom I have been collaborating since the 2015 Human/Inhuman/Posthuman Summer School, directed by Rosi Braidotti. Thank you all for many stimulating discussions about contemporary art and for unfolding the practical aspects of your work to me.

I also want to extend special thanks to Jerzy Jarniewicz and Michał Lachman from the Institute of English Studies at the University of Łódź for the encouragement I have received from them for so many years and for enabling me to become their collaborator. I would like to thank Ryszard Kluszczyński and Dorota Golańska, whose research remains a continuous inspiration, for their generous and kind support during my journey.

I am particularly grateful to all artists whose work is explored in this book for being such a source of inspiration and permitting me to use their images. Most significantly, I would like to thank Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson, Michael Burton and Michiko Nitta, Kate Clark, Patricia Piccinini, Jenna Sutela, Anna Dumitru and Alex May, Georg Tremmel and Shiho Fukuhara, Eduardo Kac, and the Warburg Institute in London. I also wish to thank Zofia Mackiewicz for the beautiful cover design, which entangles all of my ideas.

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their critical engagement and invaluable feedback. My special thanks go to Isabella Vitti and Katie Armstrong at Routledge for their enthusiasm for the project, professionalism, and support while completing this book.

This research was funded by a grant from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Łódź. Part of Chapter 4 devoted to Burton and Nitta's artistic project was published as "Performing with/for the Algae World in the Anthropocene. Burton Nitta's Algaculture projects," in *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*.

Finally, my greatest debt is to my parents and my brother for their love and ongoing support and for always allowing me to walk free, and to Wojtek for his love, *joie de vivre* and all that we can share.

# Introduction

## Unfolding Posthuman, Nonhuman and More/Than/ Human Entanglements

### From the Posthuman and the Nonhuman to the More/Than/Human Turn

As a starting point of this book's exploration of the human/nonhuman world's entanglements, I would like to take readers on an immersive journey into the history of the conceptualization of nonhumanity within the socio-cultural sphere presented in *Museum of Nonhumanity*<sup>1</sup> (Figure 0.1 and Figure 0.2), an exhibition organized in Helsinki in 2016<sup>2</sup> by Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson. Contrary to our expectations, this is not an institutional project but a mobile and temporary event that comprises numerous formats and creators. Accompanied by a site-specific educational program with lectures conducted by scientists, researchers, non-governmental organizations and civil and animal-rights activists, the exhibition draws on archival materials, dating from 2500 years ago to the present day, devoted to the oppressive mechanisms of the rhetoric of animalization not only towards humans but predominately nonhuman animals (Haapoja and Gustafsson 2016).

The ten-channel installation, which constitutes the core of the project, enriched with music composed by French composer and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen, has been arranged around 12 themes that uncover the troubled relations between human and nonhuman animals in the context of the traditional values and practices of the majority of Western institutions. As the artists highlight in their catalogue accompanying the project, the abuse of nature and animals, slavery, xenophobia, sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia, and Eurocentrism have stemmed from the anthropocentric, hierarchical worldview which has blurred the actual human/nonhuman continuum/entanglements. In this way, the *Museum of Nonhumanity*, a collaborative project inspired and instigated by numerous voices, "proposes paths towards a more sustainable understanding of our shared world" and its materiality (Haapoja and Gustafsson 2019, 5). The project has thus become a call to take action and unlearn the deeply rooted sense of human exceptionalism and reconfigure the traditional models of knowledge production that increase numerous forms of inequality imposed both on the nonhuman and the human world (2019, 5).

Haapoja and Gustafsson's museum, as a contact zone with the nonhuman, does not eradicate the human subject from the production of the socio-cultural sphere. Still, it recognizes "the nonhumans as always already present" (Ulmer 833), entangled with the world's processes responsible for the production of meaning (Barad 2003). The artists' archive does not examine the history of the marginalization of the nonhuman in isolation nor it is concerned with questions of who/what nonhumans are. Instead, the collection offers an insight into the complex relations of humans with formerly disparaged species, socio-cultural categories, and domains (Braidotti 2013, 60). Leaving aside empirical models "that seek to determine causality, validity, and reliability," the project "moves

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Figure 0.1 Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson, *Museum of Nonhumanity* 2016. Installation view, photo by Terike Haapoja. Reproduced courtesy of the artists.

towards material ways of thinking and being” (Ulmer 836). *Museum of Nonhumanity* becomes a locus where human and nonhuman bodies alike are “ethically and politically situated within the material environments” (837), inseparable from the complexity of all the natural and socio-cultural processes. In this regard, the collaborative work proposes that human bodies are always already distributed phenomena entangled with other humans and nonhumans. With an array of environmental activist workshops and community works accompanying the exhibition, *Museum of Nonhumanity* invites us to explore and learn how to take responsibility for the relational and processual character of the more-than-human world where diverse objects, organisms, forces, and materialities cross between porous bodies and where socio-material change is not only a human achievement (Whatmore 2002, 2006).



Figure 0.2 Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson, *Museum of Nonhumanity* 2016. Installation view, photo by Terike Haapoja. Reproduced courtesy of the artists.

Embracing these foundations, Haapoja and Gustafsson's project, with its aesthetic and ethical concerns, appears to be particularly relevant in helping to consolidate current critical and theoretical approaches towards the body and different forms of embodiment in cultural practices, since these are the human and nonhuman corporealities that have been the subject of oppression, marginalization, labour, exploitation and violence for many centuries. The exhibition's rich agenda, with its proposal to reconfigure the tenets of universal knowledge, aptly illustrates the line of argumentation present in my book, which examines artistic works engaged in reconsidering human position and agency vis-à-vis non-humans. The *Museum of Nonhumanity* has thus become a pointer on how to reconfigure humanism to include nonhuman agents and establish a productive dialogue between different institutional disciplines/discourses. While creating navigational tools of how to think and write *with* and *for* the more-than-human world, the artistic projects discussed in this book investigate the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman bodies that has been constantly reactivated by the application of numerous performative methods. As such, the artists respond to the ongoing transformations of bodies, present in the recent decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and accelerated by the advancement of a technoscientific field that stretches our imagination, regarding how to overcome corporeal imitations to arrive at our better and fuller capacities. It is worth highlighting that these are the conditions in which robots, hybrids, cyborgs, chimeras, superheroes, and other transgenic creatures have entered into our visual spheres for good, becoming part of our socio-cultural landscapes.

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Even though the merger of biological and technological processes contributed to the transgression of the line between human and nonhuman, natural and artificial, these cultural inter-corporeal compositions are inextricably tied to social control and its power effects (Haraway 1991; Harding 1986; Caine, Grosz, and de Lervanche 1988; Braidotti 1994). The advanced capitalist imperatives of the biotech world frequently reproduce normative practices of representation and subject constitution, upholding dualistic patterns of thinking masked as “the marketing of pluralistic differences” (Braidotti 2012, 169). Apparent equality, primarily designed for consumerism, derives from the fact that global capitalism springs from the “scattered and poly-centred yet always profit-oriented power relations which function not so much by binary oppositions but in a fragmented and all-pervasive manner” (2012, 169). Focused on the circulation of its capital, the global economy, with its biopolitical constructed tools, controls all living beings, exploiting the generative powers of plants, animals, women, men, genes, and cells in effect changing conditions of life on the Earth, often framed as the Anthropocene. Although our idea of the human has fundamentally reached its limits as “the perverse economy of our times’ challenges postanthropocentrism and what emerges is the vital politics of posthuman life” (2012, 171), the system does not improve the mechanisms of exercising power. As it has been proven during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the intensification of high-tech economy could be observed, advanced capitalism still exacerbates such mechanisms, reproducing further inequalities in the name of technoscientific and biomedical progress.

In such conditions, positioned between the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction,<sup>3</sup> the traditional anthropocentric model of knowledge, based mainly on representational research,<sup>4</sup> does not offer alternative tools for navigating and solving the problems of biotechnologically induced reality. Instead, it endorses the superiority that grants the right “(and indeed the duty of dominion in the ‘man’s dominion over earth’ paradigm of human-nature relations) to hierarchical dominion over ‘the inferior’ (‘the other’)” (Barnesmoore). In other words, the politics of exploitation of the nonhuman is not abandoned but strengthened by the mechanisms that regulate the uniformity of institutional knowledge. In such conditions, as Rosi Braidotti and Matthew Fuller observe in their 2019, “The Post-humanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences,” “growing computational systems, security terrors, new biomedical forms and drastic ecological damage, amongst other factors, impel us to recognize the wider forms and constituents of the condition that is no longer nameable simply as humanity” (4). What is left, in effect, is not to remove the humans but to reconsider their position to recognize the natureculture material continuum. By acknowledging our relationality with the nonhuman world, the ethical balance can be restored, enabling us to have a more profound understanding of the ongoing processes of the hypercomplex world.

The question that may arise in this context is how to write about human and nonhuman bodies in the face of the ecological crisis and its approaching anomalies, biotechnological advancement and its revolutionary solutions that still endorse human exceptionalism—the imminent threats and limitations brought, for instance, by the COVID-19 pandemic not to fall into the traps of the dualistic paradigm. And although substantial research has been conducted to understand the socio-cultural processes responsible for what bodies can do and what bodies can become within the humanities, recent years have accelerated broader theoretical debates about the limitations of the anthropocentric perspective. Enmeshed in the late postindustrial societies’ social, technological, and discursive systems, bodies are described and investigated as networks of different approaches, never separately. As Francesca Ferrando notices, the condition results from the fact that the “contemporary

scientific and biotechnological discourses are carving the future into a broader spectrum of alternative human embodiments, proposing a scientific revisitation of mythological chimeras, in a generic and all-inclusive posthuman horizon" (2014, 159). Transhuman, posthuman, nonhuman, ahuman, more-than-human, metahuman<sup>5</sup> are the notions that provide a nexus of ideas of conceptualizing and acknowledging the complexities of contemporary processes within the broader scale. In all theoretical perspectives, both human and nonhuman bodies have been seen as the thresholds of biotechnological endeavours that master their biological limits and dismantle their ontological status. But while all of these lines of thinking have been developing a new transdisciplinary framework that merges social research and creative practices to reposition the human, their concerns and standpoints for the nonhuman are differential. Even though they all rework the role of the human, addressing its limitations, the attachment to anthropocentrism has been so strong that in some cases, it has not been abandoned but upheld.

As Cary Wolfe notices, the *Anthropos* and *Homo universalis* are particularly accentuated in, transhumanism<sup>6</sup> which is an *intensification* of humanism (xv), or as Stefan Lorenz Sorgner highlights, "stands for humanism on steroids or a type of hyper-humanism" (38). In its attachment to science and technology as the main assets of a reformulation of the human (Ferrando 2013, 28), transhumanism, which stems from techno-optimism, replicates the same ideals and values of reason, progress, and well-being of an individual that used to govern the Enlightenment's tradition. And although some transhumanists believe that human beings can transform themselves, becoming posthuman to signify that the era without human dominance has been initiated, transhumanism should not be confused with the postanthropocentric, and postdualistic approach that posthumanism represented, for instance, to critical posthumanist thinkers. While converging technology and flesh or uploading minds into machines, transhumanists advocate emancipation from biology, contributing to new forms of enslavement to technology that are a part of capitalist technological and economic expansion. As Rosi Braidotti points out, "in this framework, the posthuman is defined as a super-human meta-rationalist entity" (2019, 60) since it enacts the tenets of advanced capitalism based on the scientific and economic understanding of all living matter (2019, 96). In its pursuit of constant biotechnological advancement, the transhumanist line of thinking does not consider the significant threats brought by anthropogenic activities to the planet, neglecting its current ecological conditions and their impact on the more-than-human world. Rather than seeing phenomena produced as a series of complex relations, what matters most in the transhumanist paradigm is the human-centred concern at the expense of the more-than-human world.

Thus, in line with Rosi Braidotti and Matthew Fuller, I am using the term posthuman in this book to identify a condition with multifarious forms across all fields of activity (2019) that succeeds the current transhuman era seen as a transitory step (Ferrando 2013, 28), whereas the posthumanities, with their variable standpoints, are seen in this project as critical "responses to the state of today's world, and a way of acting within that condition" (Braidotti and Fuller 7). The proliferation of the new productive dialogues led to the posthuman turn, which results from "thinking beyond the established anthropocentric frame, towards becoming-world" (Braidotti and Bignall 1). This brings to mind one more significant theoretical differentiation presented by Richard Grusin, who juxtaposes the posthuman with the nonhuman turn, asserting that it is "the nonhuman turn that does not make a claim about teleology or progress in which we begin with the human and see a transformation from the human to the posthuman, after or beyond the human" (ix). As Grusin explains, the nonhuman turn, in contrast, derives from the conviction that, to

paraphrase Bruno Latour, “we have never been human” but that the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman” (ix–x). What is essential in Grusin’s considerations is the fact that having examined the numerous intellectual developments,<sup>7</sup> he does not adhere to one perspective but tries to embrace all the changes induced by them into the humanities in order to highlight that they are a part of an embodied turn toward the nonhuman world and that nonhumanness is in all of us (xx). The nonhuman turn resonates with the framework of critical posthumanism oriented towards the more relational and nonhierarchical model that comprises different theoretical standpoints. However, in this context, the book employs the term *more-than-human* to highlight that the fusion of the human and nonhuman entanglements indicates that the nonhuman is already a part of the human and vice versa.

At this point, it should be emphasized that even though the notion of the posthuman and nonhuman turn have become umbrella terms that gather all the developments in the existing critiques of humanism to indicate the end of human and its conceptualization we have known so far, often creating methodological and theoretical confusion,<sup>8</sup> this book does not aim to consolidate all of the recent approaches. Instead, it seems to give insight into the approaches that, in the words of Rosi Braidotti, link posthumanism<sup>9</sup> and post-anthropocentrism (2019) in order to “reflect the multilayered and multi-directional structure of a situation that combines the displacement of anthropocentrism—in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene—with the analysis of the discriminatory aspects of European Humanism” (2019, 9). This is a critical posthumanist approach that stems from the question of the posthuman condition, as pioneered—for instance—by N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Rosi Braidotti (2006), Donna Haraway (1991), and Karen Barad (2003, 2007), who have centred their feminist perspectives on dissolving the strict dualism and “boundaries between human and nonhuman animals, biological organisms and machines, the physical and the non-physical realm; and ultimately, the boundary between technology and the self” (Ferrando 2013, 29). Moving away from the essentialist models, the philosophers of critical posthumanism propose a postcentralizing and postexceptionalism perspective, pointing to the mutable and relational positions of the human within the *more-than-human* world. These are the differences that agencies hold, be it biological or cultural, that enable such relationalities. Hence, critical posthumanist thinkers merge different disciplines, referring to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s three daughters of chaos that comprise philosophy, science, and art, to find new ways and forms of engagement with environments. And while departing from human-centred research, they apply methods of inquiry that transform dualism towards a more complex nondialectical relationality. Situated, nonhierarchical, material, interconnected and processual, critical posthumanism thus sees differences not as negative features but as productive and creative propensities for change. Hence, the artistic practices which are examined in the subsequent parts of this book produce nonhuman-centred forms of expression, transgressing the anthropocentric paradigm to emphasize that knowledge about humans has to be discussed in relation to other structures, organisms, and formations.

This perspective enables me to initiate an ethical standpoint in the book based not on the exclusion but rather on the inclusion of nonhuman agents as producers of socio-cultural meaning, confirming their significant role in the transformative processes of our planet. Suppose that humans and nonhumans are inseparably involved in the world’s processes, in that case, bodies are already distributed material-discursive phenomena (Barad 2003) in which materiality is equally entangled with discourse, constituting the *more-than-human* web of life. This approach is close to what emerges from the critical posthumanist, and