

Mutating Ecologies in Contemporary Art

Edited by Christian Alonso

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Introduction

As our world changes so does art practice and the thinking of art. How are the problems we are confronting today both as individuals and as societies are resonating within aesthetic creation? How can art, cultural becomings and institutional practice be considered in terms of environmental sustainability in the technologically-mediated era of the Anthropocene? How to reinvent modes of life when trying to make it compatible with the material and techno-scientific transformations brought about by advanced capitalism? How can we think new ethical modes that may anticipate sustainable social practices through the practice of art? How might the desire to live another world organize our everyday life in such a way that it may overturn the established order?

In light of the pressing urgencies brought about by ecological upheavals, degeneration of social relations and homogenization of habits of thought as a result of the subjecting mechanisms of advanced capitalism, both artistic and philosophical practice might concern the imagination of other subjective formations. The exploration of this hypothesis was the backbone question guiding the program of the two editions of the International Symposium *Mutating ecologies in contemporary art*, which is the source of this book. Félix Guattari claimed it is our duty to see to what extent each one of us can put into operation political, theoretical, libidinal and aesthetic, revolutionary machines that may accelerate the crystallization of a different mode of social organization. The impulse underlying the publication of this book follows Guattari's mandate.

Organized by the research group AGI (Art, Globalization, Interculturality, University of Barcelona) and hosted in the MACBA's Auditorium on December 1, 2016 and February 21, 2018, the symposiums sought to delve into the notion of an expanded – social, environmental and mental – ecology in the arts. The events brought together transdisciplinary artistic, cultural and curatorial proposals that dismantle traditional oppositional dualisms between mind-body, reason-emotion, human-animal, theory-practice, the material and the discursive, and the actual and the virtual, trying to think life and the world otherwise. The objective was to advance an understanding of art practice as provid-

ing different ways to comprehend, contest and interrogate our relation to the earth through discursive, visual and sensual strategies and methodologies, experimenting beyond disciplinary confinements and generating new posthuman subjectivities.

The symposiums departed from the premise that the Anthropocene and climate change not only define the biogeophysical planetary conditions in the early decades of the 21st century but also describes an unprecedented social and cultural space in which environmental crisis coexists with, and is related to, humanitarian disaster and multiple geopolitical conflicts on a global scale. Capitalism as a historical form of progress, biological determinism and cultural essentialism are today being imposed as dominant metanarratives. In this new territory, distinguished by structural inequalities and the rise of the logic of expulsions, the governmentality of our technologically-mediated societies operates according to a logic of manufactured risk with economies unfolding on the basis of a delusional boundless availability of natural reserves, ignoring the ecological limits of the planet. The understanding of the multi-faceted implications that these conditions entail for the sphere of relations between human and non-human entities and the configuration of possible political horizons remains an elemental issue for human sciences and the arts of our time.

The ecological paradigm of Félix Guattari constitutes an opportunity with which to consider the generative encounters between ethics, aesthetics and epistemologies in the era of the Anthropocene. In their gambit for an expanded approach to ecology that not only includes the natural (environment), but also the social (socius) and the mental (psyche) spheres, the analysis links planetary sustainability as the capability to think through these three registers. This methodology manages to grasp the toxic effects of the logic of advanced capitalism and neo-liberal globalization in a cognitive, social and structural level. As a way to assume our responsibility in the face of our historicity, our relations to the planet and other species become inseparable from the analysis of the power conditions and relations that define our location. As argued by the critical posthumanist, neomaterialist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, the challenge as well as the opportunity of living posthuman times consists in seizing the opportunities for new kinship systems with sexualized, racialized and naturalized otherness with which sustainable relations are built, fostering a life-centred egalitarianism that will anticipate a new social nexus.

The book *Mutating ecologies in contemporary art* seeks to expand on the value and the effectiveness of the philosophical tradition of vital materialism as a non-dualist model of political ecology that enables ways of imagining alternative forms of relation and political action. This model of thought nourishes

current artistic imagination, modulating compounds made of forces and materials, imbuing proposals that can be seen as going beyond blind spots of liberal individualism and deep ecology in the affirmation of the rhizomatic, embodied and embedded nature of subjectivity, which is inherently ethical. Just as we need a philosophy after nature it becomes imperative engaging in imagining an art after nature understood as a the practice of composing a common world that both expresses and conquers immanence as the plane upon which nomadic subjects build alternative ethical relations.

The artists, curators, philosophers, researchers, writers and art historians included in this book are working with environmental sustainability as a methodology, both as instituting practice and as a critique of institutional behaviours. The diverse contributions act out new possibilities of inhabiting another earth, another body and new forms of relation between and beyond humans on the basis of interdependence and mutual coexistence across species. The various voices gathered bring forward narratives, cartographies and figurations of the mutating universes of value taking place in our contemporary societies through the thinking and the practice of art. It is precisely the will to bridge theory and practice that explains the diverse character of the texts, shifting indistinctively from a more analytical to essayistic nature.

I want to thank all the agents that made possible the realization of the two editions of the symposium and the further development into this book publication. First of all, I want to deeply thank Anna Maria Guasch, Director of the Research Group AGI, University of Barcelona, for being so supportive of this initiative from the very beginning, both in relation to the production of the events and the funding of this book. I want to thank Pablo Martinez, head of Public Programs and Education at MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, for believing in the appropriateness of the two editions of the symposium to be hosted at MACBA Auditorium. My most sincere gratitude to every participant whose talks shaped a very interesting, critical, geographically and disciplinary diverse program:¹ Maja and Reuben Fowkes, Anne Sauvagnargues, Anna-Maria Hällgreen, Mitra Azar, Joana Moll, Laura Benítez Valero, Maria Heras López, Marta Dahó, Radek Przedpełski, Helena Torres, Fiona Curran, Christine Mackey, Pablo DeSoto, Ila Nicole Sheren, Daniela Voss, Quelic Berga, Javier Melenchón, Pau Alsina, Hanna Husberg, Carles Garcia O'Dowd, Beatriz Regueira, Chiara Sgaramella, Alfredo Puente, Begonya Saez Tajafuerce, Claudia Villazón, Lukas Masewicz, Ignacio Acosta, Jean-Sébastien Laberge, Sergi

¹ For further details on the program and the call for papers we launched on occasion on the symposium, visit <https://artglobalizationinterculturality.com/activities/symposiums/>.

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CHRISTIAN ALONSO

² Graphic and textual documentation can be found at <http://caosmosis.net/>.

Former nature, former human, former art: thresholds of intensity

Christian Alonso

In the context of a globally-linked, technologically-mediated world defined by an increasing resource depletion and raising inequalities, the ascent of wars under the regimes of necropolitics, biopiracy and dispossession, we – human animals, non-human animals and all living entities – are exposed like oil, gas or minerals to exploitative, extractivist and commodifying practices through which advanced capitalism keeps on accumulating and producing value. Within this framework, humanities are compelled to envision an analysis that might account for the systemic and fluid complexities of our times affecting our existence, one that would incorporate a call for action anticipating modes of being together otherwise. This analysis would have to trace more intricate, multi-layered interdependence between nature, culture and technology, shifting the simplistic vision of the effect of shared vulnerability of current catastrophic, end-of-the world narratives, into productive, generative trans-species alliances for the sake of the sustainability of life on the planet. In short, it becomes imperative to provide a more self-critical, egalitarian and ecological understanding of the present and the future.

Guattarian ecosophy manages to grasp this complexity through the notion of transversality. To think ecosophically is to be capable of tracing relations between individual subjectivity, social relations and the environment from a transversal perspective, considering the problems affecting the three systems from an integrated approach. Nature, culture and technology are situated in a radical flat ontology where ecology is defined as the method of grasping interactions between the infinite machines populating the world. Former essences are now defined as machines invested in setting couplings and connections with other machines in a permanent flux of transmission. These machines are being understood as auto-poietic systems capable of reading intensities and negotiating equilibrium through their feedback loops. Through the power relations traversing us, processes of subjectivation escaping them could be opened, allowing us to access other existential modes. Posthuman ecophilosophy devel-

oped by Rosi Braidotti gives further impetus to Guattarian ecosophy insofar as the acknowledgement of the structural, transversal and post-anthropocentric bond implied in the position of the posthuman subject provides a decisive opportunity for the creation of a new social nexus. This would have to be forged on the basis of a redefinition of elemental notions such as kinship, interdependence and accountability not only among humans but also between non-anthropomorphic and technologically-mediated others.

Both approaches point to the presumption that living in posthuman times, basic notions such as nature and the human have undergone profound mutations determining the question of subjectivity. This is to say, recent material and socio-economic reconfigurations of the world proves a quest for examining how ways of being and acting in that world may have undergone transformations. The post-anthropocentrism implied in both models points not merely to the criticism of humanism but amounts to the productive creation of alternative conceptions of the self, the human, society and the arts that may imagine a world yet to come. Far from being exhausted in the advent of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Guattarian radical ecology deserves more than ever further scrutiny. It compels us to act out multiple explorations into how his philosophy may be implemented by practical and experimental applications into everyday life. In this essay I will explore how Guattarian ecosophy resonates with Braidotti's posthuman ecophilosophy in terms of envisioning others forms of habitual dominant subjective formations and by being committed to the invention of new possibilities of life, and by reconsidering our relation with alterity, engaging in routes toward more openness, new sensibilities, by generating post-anthropocentric and anti-humanist ethics and politics.

If the decline of the centrality of Man and the dislocation of the human brought about by the emergence of posthuman discourses has led to a new understanding of the relation of humans and non-human life and to more complex interactions, what would be the place of art within these parameters? If the practice and study of art used to be centred on humanness, what would be the role of art within a planetary, geo-centred, cosmic frame anticipated by the posthuman predicament? Following Anne Sauvagnargues' account of art as a machine modulating forces and materials unfolding upon maps of affects, I expand into how art makes visible the intensities and forces of materiality beyond cultural machines of representation and interpretation. I argue that the art encounter is capable of opening up thresholds of intensity unleashing an active, self-expressing matter with which we interact in a process in which meaning and affect interweave, allowing new forms of subjectivity to take place. The ecosophic artist opens up, materializes, composes a new world, a new existential territo-

ry always there yet uninhabited, and in so doing we meet the deterritorializing power of the machinism operating in art. In creating micropolitical mutations and posthuman becomings, generating new existential territories and universes of value, the praxis of the ecosophic artist can be seen as operating a rupture with capitalistic forms of subjection, anticipating new forms of relation and modes of being together otherwise.

Guattarian radical ecology

How do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity – if it ever had it – a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of cosmos? (Guattari, 1995, pp. 119–120)

Félix Guattari thought that only through the affective powers of the art encounter we would be able to counteract the environmental, social and psychological challenges posed against us in the twenty-first century. He believed art preserves infinite existential territories that could be inhabited by simultaneously political, ethical and aesthetic projects. This is to say, following Guattari's words, the art encounter is the bearer of a new constellation of universes of reference that enable the bifurcation of our existence away from capitalistic modes of life. The aesthetic dimension of his ethical-aesthetical paradigm described creativity as an elemental tool for the process of singularization – largely described as a rupture of sense, a cut, the detachment of a semiotic content – that would originate mutating vectors of subjectivation (Guattari, 1995, p. 18). The territories preserved in art are glimpsed in the art encounter, an event in which lines of flight pave the way to uncharted journeys. These lines of flight may be seen as passages allowing exodus from habitual dominant subjective formations and from the dull everyday life, towards unfamiliar, productive journeys.

By 1989 Guattari was already well aware of the state of environmental unsustainability affecting all living entities: "The Earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations. If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface" (Guattari, 1995, p. 27). However, as he rightly noted, the degradation of the environment was only a partial sign of a larger problem. Guattari thought that environmental pollution caused by advanced capitalism had to be

seen in direct relation to the colonization of imaginaries of individuals and the erosion of the solidarity of the social fabric. In a passage from *The Three Ecologies* written in 1989 he commensurates the invasiveness of the algae spreading in the lagoon of Venice with the toxic effects of real estate speculation and gentrification instigated by Donald Trump and the degenerate images and statements populating TV screens. Just as dead fish proliferate as a direct effect of the algae, the evicted and dispossessed thousands of poor families resulting from the takeover of entire districts of New York and Atlantic City grow, and we are increasingly subdued to repeat the roles and reproduce the prefabricated modes of life supplied by mass media. The ecology of the social field is intertwined with the ecology of nature and so is the ecology of the mind. When facing environmental upheavals it is not sufficient to turn our attention to ecosystems in an isolated way, but we need to operate simultaneously from a mental ecology (psyche), social ecology (socius) and natural ecology (environment), which do not find themselves confined but they coexist in the same plane of reality and influence one another. Any rooted and lasting change would necessarily entail the confrontation of the problems affecting the three systems through an integrated approach.

This attempt to think complexity is analogous to the way Saskia Sassen considers today the relations between small farmers being evicted from their land due to the development of palm plantations, now slum dwellers in vast megacities, government workers in Greece cut out of their jobs, now unemployed as a result of the EU demands to reduce the debt, and vast portions of former rich, productive land are poisoned by toxic emissions from mines or factories, now expelled from working land and forgotten (Sassen, 2014, p. 215). Sassen argues the key logic underlying these trends is the dynamic of expulsion (economic, social biospheric) arising from the decaying political economy of the twentieth century as a result of the move from Keynesianism to the global era of privatization, deregulation, and open borders for some entailing the expelling of others (Sassen, 2014, p. 211). These conditions define a systemic edge that is largely the result of a very narrow conception of economic growth both our economies and forms of social organization have fallen under. These destructive forces traverse our conceptual tools with which we used to imagine the economy, society, ideologies, and so on, but become invisible to the eye, hence, as Sassen states, it is a problem of finding adequate cartographies of these fluidic dynamics. Only the conceptual recognition of these subterranean conditions traversing the three ecologies will allow “new spaces for making – making local economies, new histories, and new modes of membership” (Sassen, 2014, p. 222).

The interest turned towards ecology was developed by Guattari more explicitly in his later writings from an embodied, practice-based activism that fuelled

a wholly philosophical project that, combining politics, environmentalism and art, posited an ethico-aesthetic paradigm he named Ecosophy, one of his most notable contributions to twenty-first century emancipatory political imagination. To think ecosophically is precisely to be capable of tracing unseen, transversal relations between individual subjectivity, social relations and the environment. Far from standing as a logic of discursive sets (functions, dynamics), ecology is here defined as a new logic of intensities generating creative, qualitative analysis allowing crossings and connections between disparate domains. The generalization of ecology into ecosophy can lead to a new understanding of the social, the technical, and the aesthetic, anticipating new attributes of subjectivity in light of the globally linked, technologically mediated societies defined by increasing uneven access to economic and environmental resources.

Some of Guattari's ideas may seem familiar to us, inhabitants of the twenty-first century. We might even feel its effects, but there's no doubt they were not as recognizable by his time. Guattari saw in the 1980s how the modest attempts to repair the "ecological unbalance" from an early environmentalism were narrowing its scope by only focussing on the field of industrial pollution from a technocratic perspective. Capitalism also deteriorates social relations, and so erodes collective and individual human modes of life. Guattari noted that the relation of subjectivity with alterity was experimenting a regression, now confined in unidimensional universes of value that are ruled by the axiom of profit. This axiom does not obey a program of an ideological nature but a mode of production that targets our desire as a new territory for its expansion. The only effective response to the ecological crisis, as Guattari argued, would bring about "an authentic political, social and cultural revolution, reshaping the objectives of the production of both material and immaterial assets". This revolution must concern not only the "visible relations of forces on a grand scale" but also the "molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire" (Guattari, 2000, p. 28). Because for Guattari capitalism is a system of semiotization, homogenization and of transmission of forms of power over goods, over labour, over subordinates, family relatives, and so on, only the emergence of other forms of relation would transform the fixation of desire of individuals towards capital and its diverse forms of crystallizations of power (Guattari, 2000, p. 239). Ecosophy would pave the way to the construction of a post-media era involving new sensibilities, new desires, facilitating individual and collective processes of enunciation and the transformation and reinvention of institutions. Guattari's hypotheses are of greater pertinence today, perhaps even more than they were in his time, since the problems of his time have only intensified in ours.

What led Guattari to see that not only are ecosystems exposed to pollution but also our symbolic universes determining social relations was his elemental insight on the perception of capital as integral to power formations, that is, as a subjugating force of planetary scope, as a force attempting to model our mentalities. In other words, the Guattarian socio-political analysis was his insight on how the capitalist mode of subjectivation as a generalized lifestyle based purely on consumerism could be equivalent with human thriving. His account of machinism and machinization developed in partnership with Gilles Deleuze contributed to cast light on this issue. For Deleuze and Guattari, advanced capitalism is no longer understood as a mode of production but as a subjectivation machine taking control of the load of desire that defines us as individuals and collectivity. This machine puts to work a set of devices of “social subjection” and “machinic enslavement” through which capitalism exerts control upon us (Guattari, 2009, p. 244). The former devices refer to mechanisms of domination through which capitalism produces us as subjects and fixes us with a specific form according to the needs of power (sex, identity, nationality...) and the latter, to the apparatus of precognitive colonization of our affects, perceptual functions and sensations, that is, unconscious behaviours preceding the formation of the subject. Subjection operates upon the molar, individuated level, and enslavement intervenes in the molecular, preindividual, presocial dimension. It is upon this double bind that accumulation, exploitation and value production takes place.

It is in accordance with the operational mode of this second set of devices that we can see ourselves as an integral part of the machine, as parts or components. Not of a technical machine, but of a more general form of power device that requires our permanent participation and complicity. This conception of machinism, however, does not simply constitute a form of domination but also retains an infinite repertoire of possibilities given its capacity to open up processes of creation. As Guattari maintains, from the power relations traversing us, processes of subjectivation escaping them could be opened, allowing us to access other existential modes. But this openness enabling possibilities must be built. It is precisely this element of creation that defines the aesthetic dimension of Guattari’s ethical-political project. And it is from this point of view that aesthetic practice takes on a vital importance. To battle the capitalist form of subjectivation does not mean to go back to a pre-technological as some strand of deep–shallow ecology may claim, but to explore alternative forms of subjectivity and social organization through technology. Guattari thought that the only possible liberation from what he called Integrated World Capitalism had to come from a praxis-based molecular revolution that would em-

ploy the tools and devices of techno-scientific capitalism, namely digital technologies, that have the potential for subversion. The emancipatory potential of digital technologies is drawn from its capacity to allow access to an ever changing, always shifting, open, rhizomatic space where infinite molecular connections and productions could be made, connecting bodies and materializing new environments.

Guattarian ecosophy offers a radical new conception of environmental practice insofar as it amounts to a redefinition of our very basic notions and principles. The urgent need for implementing an ecosophy departed from his analysis of the unsustainability of the modes of conceiving and inhabiting life on Earth. This concern led Guattari to call for the development of new subjectivities, the urgent task of experimenting with other forms of living that would institute change. But current categories of meaning and customary conceptual tools would not help advancing this goal. Guattari believed that in order to build sustainable futures, a radical reconfiguration of thought was needed, because, as he claimed, in order to act differently we must think differently. The questions of who are we? and who do we want to become? become of paramount importance in his ethical-political ecological project.

What would a radical reconfiguration of thought and life entail? For Guattari, as for Deleuze, the important question underlying their thought was finding a way of gearing nature and physics into culture and the psychic, and the other way around. In other words, their philosophical project they named Geophilosophy aims at developing a non-representational paradigm of nature and materiality. While deep ecology objectifies nature and species providing them with subjective status, Deleuze and Guattari intensify non-human life revealing its expressionism, paving the way for encounters and interactions between non-human life and machines. The goal is to reveal what is cultural and mental in the material, and the material and cultural in thought, through a cosmic and ethical sensibility.

While the postmodern, social and linguistic constructivism largely understood nature, the material and the real as a mere effect of language, perceiving it as translation within the limits of representation and thus systematically excluding the material real from the realm of representation, geophilosophy might be understood as a method of unleashing nature as real materiality by tracing nature-culture feedback loops. The limitations perceived in the account of nature by linguistic constructivism led Deleuze and Guattari to seize the opportunities for a philosophy of the suppressed of representation, this explains the attention given to the prepersonal, pre-individual, infra-social, the non-human, the non-signifier, and so forth.

Generalized machinics

The intelligent materialism developed by Deleuze and Guattari aspired to re-think the very notions of nature and the human from a non-anthropocentric perspective, placing them into a continuum that included technology. Far from seeing them as separate realms or spheres that would presuppose technophobia or the privileging of non-human wilderness, these three fields are now perceived as operating on the same level of the real, influencing and determining one another. Nature is not any more understood as separated from humans and technology. Hence, former distinctions between natural and artificial, organic and inorganic, human life and non-human life are no longer valid. Humans, nature and technology are conceptualized as immanent to a machinic ground. These three elements are conjoined as machines, a central conception in their philosophical model to understand complex relations between human and non-human life, both intelligent or auto-poietic:

[...] we make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production or industry [...] man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other – not even in the sense of bipolar opposites within a relationship of causation, ideation, or expression (cause and effect, subject and object, etc.); rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, pp. 4–5)

Essences are now seen as machinic aggregates. Matter is machinic insofar as the world is populated by a variety of machines: self-enunciative machines, biological machines, desiring machines, signifying, non-signifying machines, cultural and discursive machines, aesthetic creation machines and machines of cultural representation, among others. These regimes constitute the elements in which ecology, now described as machinism, operates as the method to grasp resonances, vibrations, interactions between human and non-humans and their environment. What define machines are precisely connections, assemblages, couplings and productions. Machines are

[...] at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said the id. Everywhere it is machines – real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 2)