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## **Experience as Assemblage in the Art of the Foggy Anthropocene**

PhD dissertation supervised by

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### **Resume**

This dissertation puts forward a new approach to human experience in the context of the ongoing anthropogenic environmental changes. The approach, however, departs from traditional typologies of experience which distinguish between aesthetic and everyday experiences, or between sensory and intellectual experiences. Drawing on contemporary assemblage theory (DeLanda, Lowenhaupt-Tsing) and affective theory (Massumi), the dissertation argues that such experiences are only temporary effects of the continuous transformation of experience as an assemblage of multisensory, intellectual, and affective experiences that emerge in specific more-than-human configurations. In order to describe this type of experience, the dissertation posits a new epoch, the foggy Anthropocene which is a speculative fabulation (Haraway) about the world where the hegemony of sight as an epistemic tool of orientation has been weakened. According to the Moderns, it is the sight which guarantees achieving solid knowledge about the world. The fog limits the visual field prompting people to use multiple senses simultaneously. The foggy Anthropocene, however, not only refers to meteorological phenomena. Rather, the fog metonymizes numerous phenomena, including those that are usually labelled as artistic. They all account for momentary and often contingent configurations of elements that blur the boundaries between the natural, the cultural and the technological. These configurations only emerge as a result of performances of different agencies, which do not have easily identifiable essences. It is only by making a list of their performances and the effects they produce that materiality can be reassigned to who or what performs, although the consequences of these activities can never

be fully predicted. Considering the aims of this dissertation, its structure is organized around an extended introduction followed by four chapters and closing remarks.

Chapter 1 aims to define the foggy Anthropocene and distinguish it from other speculative fabulations about the times we live in. Thus, I refer to three occurrences of the fog. Two of them appeared in the Earth's atmosphere whereas the third is a metaphorical fog emerging in contemporary digital technologies. First of all, I take a closer look at the Great Killer Fog in London in 1952 in order to see how the foggy Anthropocene differs from the epochs performed by environmental historians. Unlike capitalocene (Moore) and necrocene (McBrien), my epoch focuses less on the processes of *longue durée* than on short-term phenomena that produce temporary and often casual assemblages of nature, culture and technology. Such perspective not only reveals the unpredictable effects of contemporary phenomena, characteristic of the foggy anthropocene, which evade all attempts at rationalisation. It also becomes a starting point for the critical analysis of the traditional ways of thinking about the environment. Secondly, I refer to the fog used metaphorically in foggy computing i. e. a decentralized virtual platform on which data is collected and processed. The analysis of examples of fog computing in networks of sensors that program the Earth aims not only to question the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of natural environment as an objectively existing set of ecological relations. It also enables us to critically reflect and expand on the contemporary theories of naturalcultural environments in which the natural cannot be separated from human life practices. Fog computing clearly shows that foggy Anthropocene performs programmable naturalculturaltechnological environments which materialize differently depending on the place, manner and scale in which people and machines process specific sets of environmental data. Thirdly, I analyse another unexpected appearance of fog which is yet to be explained. Namely, it is the Birling Gap fog which emerged on the South-East coast of the UK in 2017. This example clearly evidences that the phenomena of the foggy Anthropocene incite critical reflection on the traditional models of human experience. Analysing the smell of non-existent chlorine reported by beachgoers in Birling Gap, I argue that the foggy Anthropocene accounts for amodal human experience. Amodal experience is a result of a dynamic fusion of multisensory impressions, intellectual and affective experiences, which challenges the received binary oppositions such as truth/illusion and the human body/its environment. Critical reflection on the amodal experience then becomes the basis for the new approach to human experience. However, the concept of the foggy Anthropocene formulated in this chapter, which directs attention to the unpredictable effects of short-term

anthropogenic phenomena and situated practices of producing naturalculturaltechnological environments convincingly proves that any theoretical proposals also require a new language of analysis. After all, dynamic and complex phenomena and environments of the foggy Anthropocene cannot be described by means of such traditional categories as subject, object or interaction, as they are inseparably connected with essentialist thinking about man and the world. Therefore, I conclude this chapter with a short lexicon where I propose not only new concepts, but also modified definitions of existing concepts to be employed in the dissertation.

Whereas Chapter 1 situates the foggy Anthropocene among other speculative fabulations about the current ecosituation, Chapter 2 defines experience as assemblage against traditional aesthetic experience, traditional scientific experience and the experience of the Anthropocene. I begin the chapter by defining the concept of assemblage in relation to terms such as *agencement*, *assemblage* and arrangement, which are often treated as its equivalents. Scrutinizing subtle yet significant semantic differences between the term allows me to indicate those aspects of assemblage which are particularly important for the new approach to human experience in the foggy Anthropocene. From this perspective, I analyse three experiences, two as assemblages and one that can be considered as an ambivital experience. First of all, I recall my experience of the installation *Mud Muse* (1968-1971) by Robert Rauschenberg evoked in me. Of course, I could not visit it right after its premiere in the 1960s. I am therefore referring to the experience that emerged when I visited the retrospective of his work at Tate Modern in London in 2017. The analysis of my own experience allows me to show how the experience as an assemblage differs both from the traditional aesthetic experience, rooted in the modernist paradigm of the autonomy of art, and from the art experience that appeared with the performance twist of the 1960s and 1970s. Secondly, I will refer to my experience of the bioart installation *Circumventive organs* (2016) by the Australian designer Agi Haines which consisted of artificial bioprinted human-animal organs. The installation, however, was not exhibited in the conventional space of art, but in the Copernicus Science Centre devoted to popularizing traditional sciences. My experience therefore serves to situate the experience as assemblage against the traditional scientific experience which produces objective knowledge about the world. In this context, I will be particularly interested in the question of representation in the sciences, which, as contemporary philosophers of science point out, is closely related to the historical thinking on representation in the arts. Drawing on the findings of the American philosopher and theoretical physicist Karen Barad, I show that experience as assemblage, evoked in the art of

the foggy Anthropocene, forces a change in the mirror metaphor of modern science and art that reflects objectively existing reality. At the end of this chapter, I refer to the ambivital experience of the installation *Biomimesis: Hyphae* (2013) by the artist and programmer Szymon Kaliski. The installation fused interactive art, algorithms and mycological discourse to draw visitors' attention to the ecological relations between people and fungi. A friend of mine, who volunteered to look after the installation, felt so attached to the naturalculturaltechnological environment that she decided to protect mushrooms from death. Therefore, the experience triggered by Kaliski's installation allows me to distinguish the experience as an assemblage from the Anthropocene experience, which is mentioned in contemporary critical Anthropocene studies.

While Chapter 2 reflects on *what* experiences as assemblages can be, Chapter 3 focuses on *how* such experiences arise. I am particularly interested in two ways of materializing such experiences: polyphony and emergence. The former refers to the concept of polyphonic assemblage, formulated by American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing. Although Lowenhaupt-Tsing makes a direct reference to contemporary assemblage theory, her concept radically differs from that of DeLanda. Lowenhaupt-Tsing contends that assemblages are not relational wholes, but gatherings of ways of being. It is about the intertwined life practices of people and organic non-humans and the ways inanimate matter exists. They resemble voices or melodies of a polyphonic musical piece and only occasionally harmoniously interact with each other in the ear of the listener. The Lowenhaupt-Tsing's polyphony allows us to see that the ways in which people and nonhumans coexist have a specific rhythm and function in different temporalities. Although their encounters are always accidental and temporary, they always bring about unpredictable changes. Using Lowenhaupt-Tsing's findings, I show how experiences as assemblages are initiated in installations which stage entanglements of human and nonhuman lifeways. My guide throughout the first part of this chapter are matsutake mushrooms described by Lowenhaupt-Tsing. Their complex life practices elucidate different aspects of producing polyphonic assemblages in projects at the intersection of speculative design, bioart and ecoart that mobilize various species of mushrooms. While the polyphonic character of assemblages allows us to see the processes of experience formation primarily as a result of contingent encounters between people and biotic non-humans, the concept of emergence reveals how these experiences arise from encounters between people and abiotic nonhumans. I am particularly interested in such phenomena of the art of foggy anthropocene, whose initiators initiate encounters of people and various types of technological nonhumans:

artificial neural networks, avatars or generative architectures. In his work *Philosophy and Simulation. The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* DeLanda argues that emergence, understood as the appearance of qualitatively new phenomena that cannot be reduced to the elements that contributed to their creation, originates from chemistry and physics of the inanimate world. It gestures towards interactions between bodies, leading to the emergence of new properties, behaviours and capabilities that none of these bodies previously possessed. In this context, I critically scrutinize the definition of emergent assemblages proposed by the DeLanda, which are always more than the sum of its parts. Analysing examples of phenomena of the foggy Anthropocene, I show that experience as assemblage can be, depending on the context, both more or less than the sum of its parts.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how experiences as assemblages work and what their function may be. The framework for my deliberations is provided this time by the concept of affect in the sense of Brian Massumi, already mentioned. Referring to the research of neuropsychologists in the early 1990s in his extensive essay *The Autonomy of Affect*, he defined affectation as an impersonal, bodily force that acts not so much within the human body as between different, human and non-human, bodies. The basis for his deliberations was, of course, a thorough criticism of Freudian psychoanalysis. It inseparably links the affect with the concept of a coherent human subject that strives to maintain a homeostatic physical and mental balance. According to this approach, every affective surplus must be "regulated" during therapy. For Massumi, however, affect is a force that, depending on the context, produces both stabilizing and destabilizing effects. Although his work was created more than twenty years ago and has recently been heavily criticized, these findings, supplemented by more contemporary theoretical concepts, help me to show ways of thinking about ecology, alternative to the modern concept of nature as a matter independent of man, deprived of causality and passive. In particular, I am interested in the issue of the efficiency of inorganic non-humans such as fogs, rocks or ice. Reflection on this subject is not only absent in traditional ecology. It also occupies a marginal place in contemporary studies of anthropocene. Therefore, installations that allow visitors to experience a specific type of inorganic in-humanity. To describe this type of causality, I use the findings of the British eco philosopher Timothy Morton from *Humankind*. Although he does not refer directly to Massumi's work, he formulates such a concept of causality as rocking, which is based on a similar way of thinking about action, questioning binary oppositions between motion and stillness and the active and passive. Secondly, I will also show that affective experiences as assemblages can serve to create a new

way of producing knowledge about inorganic non-humans, alternative to the modern paradigm of objectivity in the sciences, which assumes that the researcher observes from a cool distance the object of research that exists independently of him. To this end, I will recall such installations that transform the matter of facts about today's climate change into what American science and technology researcher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa does in her work *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* is called matter of care . It is about embodied and situational ways of producing knowledge in technosciences that contribute to taking care of the world and repairing it to ensure the best possible (survival) for ourselves and others. At the end of this chapter I will prove that the affective experiences initiated in the art of foggy anthropocene encourage us to take responsibility for a deepening ecological disaster. However, I do not mean responsibility as a feeling of guilt for the deteriorating state of the environment, nor responsibility resulting from the failure to adhere to predefined moral principles. I am rather interested in the concept of responsibility-ability, alternative to such thinking, that Donna Haraway formulates in the work *Staying with the Trouble* mentioned above, referring to people's ability to respond to the problems faced by people and non-humans threatened by anthropogenic environmental changes. A critical reading of Haraway's work will allow me to show that her concept includes both the ability to respond to the problems of people, animals and plants, as well as inorganic actors, such as ice.

As a conclusion, I situate the concept of the foggy anthropocene and the associated experience as an assemblage in the broader context of the recently popular pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives about the end of Man and speculation about what the world could look like if there were no people there. However, I don't mean neither the scripts, known from popular culture, full of momentum, of the imminent ecological catastrophe, in which the whole humanity will die out, as shown, for example, in Roland Emmerich's science-fiction film *2012* (2009). Or the utopian transhumanistic projects of creating a technologically improved Man 2.0, expressed for example in the popular science work *Homo deus. A short story of tomorrow* (2018) by the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, or about the escapist plans to move mankind to other planets that the American millionaire Elon Musk has recently been making. Their authors usually fall into a pompous tone, resurrecting such universalist and essentialist notions as Humanity or Man, with which it would seem that the poststructuralist theories of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been dealt with. What is more, the secularized religious imaginary launched in these narratives serves to sustain the conservative discourse about the Anthropocene as an era in which not so much man but the White Man, most often a

Christian, has to defend himself against what he considers foreign and hostile: terrorists, women, transsexuals or refugees. Meanwhile, as media expert Joanna Żylińska argues in her recent work *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, speculations about the end of Man can be successfully used to bring the discussion about the anthropology back to Earth, reminding us that man cannot exist without the relations he establishes with other people and non-humans. Using the perspective of the feminist counterapocalypse she proposes, I will look at selected performances of scientific fantasy, focusing on the scenarios of the future on an irreversibly destroyed planet. For this purpose, I will use two recently popular in the discourse about the anthropogenic figure - monster and spirit. The first one focuses on various symbiotic relations between people and non-humans, which go far beyond individualistic models of human identity. The second refers to anthropogenic landscapes, haunted both by past and future relations between people and non-humans, which unexpectedly begin to come to light, causing unpredictable consequences. From this perspective, looking at the monsters that populate the post-apocalyptic worlds of the authors of science fiction, I will think about what kind of creatures will survive on a destroyed planet. Then, by following the ghosts that are triggered by science fiction performances, I indicate what the future may look like, in which the apocalypse does not mean a single unique event, but is an integral part of the everyday experience of people on a damaged planet.