

HUMAN NATURE. THE ART OF SUSTAINABILITY*

REFLECTIONS BY VERENA WINIWARTER

The art exhibition “Human Nature. The Art of Sustainability” was conceived as part of the symposium “Global Sustainable Development Goals in a Mediatized World”. The inclusion of art signals that the Sustainable Development Goals are not merely a scientific programme, but an all-encompassing agenda comprising art, the sciences and education in a unifying endeavour.

Anna Artaker began working on her nature self-prints in 2017 with a process in which the plant is used to create an impression on a lead plate, so that not only does the artwork depict nature, but the depiction is also created through nature itself. The artist used the same plants with which

William Henry Fox Talbot showcased his photographic process in 1844–46. The title of her work, “The Pencil of Nature”, is taken from Talbot to emphasize the connection. The creative process makes a powerful statement on human entanglement with the natural world. The plants to be printed – nettles, butterburs, forest ferns, to name just three – are pressed directly into the soft metal and a two-fold galvanoplastic process is then used to produce the copper plate from which the prints are taken. This destroys the original, the plant, and resurrects it, transformed to art in its fragile tenderness, in almost translucent pictures which also speak to the fragility of their beauty.

The work also speaks to the figure of Homo faber, the active human being. Through her artistic creation, Anna Artaker tells the story of the search for beauty in nature, a search that

strongly links her work to the sustainability debate. The artist is active herself, destroys the precious living plants for the sake of conserving their image and uses toxic substances without which printing would not be possible: lead, the ingredients of the galvanic baths, copper and more. Her work thus stands at the centre of an art of sustainability that does not ignore paradoxes and contradictions, but embraces and reflects them.

Uwe Sleytr’s colourful, large pictures adorn, among other places, a building of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, where for decades he taught as professor of microbiology. His work is a different “art of sustainability”.

Rather than directly introducing Uwe Sleytr’s work, I want to highlight a connection between his artistic statements and that of a group of British artists who wrote *The Dark Mountain*

* A prior version of this talk was delivered in German as an introduction to the opening of the exhibition at the OeAW. The oral form has been slightly edited.

Manifesto, a 20-page reflection situating art in the current world. This text, written in 2008 at the height of the global financial crisis, allows us to link evolution and civilisation, a link that is pertinent to human survival and ties in with Uwe Sleytr's work. Paul Kingsnorth's and Dougald Hine's manifesto is called *Uncivilisation*. The text starts with two quotations, one of them by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilisation", and continues with a text entitled "Walking on Lava":

"Those who witness extreme social collapse at first hand seldom describe any deep revelation about the truths of human existence. What they do mention, if asked, is their surprise at how easy it is to die.

The pattern of ordinary life, in which so much stays the same from one day to the next, disguises the fragility of its fabric. How many of our activities are made possible by the impression of stability that pattern gives? So long as it repeats, or varies steadily enough, we are able to plan for tomorrow as if all the things we rely on and don't think about too carefully will still be there. When the pattern is broken, by civil war or natural disaster or the smaller-scale

tragedies that tear at its fabric, many of those activities become impossible or meaningless, while simply meeting needs we once took for granted may occupy much of our lives.

What war correspondents and relief workers report is not only the fragility of the fabric, but the speed with which it can unravel. As we write this, no one can say with certainty where the unravelling of the financial and commercial fabric of our economies will end. Meanwhile, beyond the cities, unchecked industrial exploitation frays the material basis of life in many parts of the world, and pulls at the ecological systems which sustain it."

The authors observe that an awareness of the fragility of "civilisation" is not new.

"'Few men realise,' wrote Joseph Conrad in 1896, 'that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings.' Conrad's writings exposed the civilisation exported by European imperialists to be little more than a comforting illusion, not only in the dark, unconquerable heart of Africa, but in the whited sepulchres of their capital cities. The inhabitants of that

civilisation believed 'blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion,' but their confidence could be maintained only by the seeming solidity of the crowd of like-minded believers surrounding them. Outside the walls, the wild remained as close to the surface as blood under skin, though the city-dweller was no longer equipped to face it directly."²

The wilderness still lies under our skin, as close as blood, experienced by every abrasion, and yet is willingly ignored for survival's sake. Uwe Sleytr forms masks from clay with his hands, masks reminding me of vertebral structures, reminding me that we are vertebrates too. He covers them with gold, in fire they are transformed. Then coloured liquid is splashed against them or they are photographed in front of distorted mirrors to express the coincidences of evolution. Uwe Sleytr, himself a biologist, poses a fundamental question with his works. With our human cognitive horizon and despite all the information and data that we have and still produce, can

² dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/

we seriously consider or even plan a next stage of evolution derived from us? As a biologist he knows, and as a human being and artist he feels, “It is not only our destiny that we are the first life form that has the ability to change its own genome, but that at the same time we cannot generate appropriate rules for all visionary concepts of the evolution of our species. Humanity is in the process of developing the ability to separate the evolution of life from its previous evolutionary rules.” So Uwe Sleytr, the artist-scientist, asks, “Are we in a position as primates who are supposed to invent man?” His art deals with the interfaces between the body and technology. These precarious places of translation between evolutionary and technical code are revealed. This links him with the manifesto of *Uncivilisation* and shows his profound contribution to an art of sustainability.

A third, and entirely different work of art floated under the ceiling of the Academy’s festive hall. At the suggestion of and under the guidance of their teacher Peder Hill, students of a class at the bilingual grammar school in Draschestraße in Vienna built a humpback whale out of plastic bottle waste, which, titled “The Last

Whale”, is intended to remind us of the danger human intervention poses to the ecosystems of the oceans. The whale is an intervention in itself. The act of hanging 5 metres’ worth of plastic waste turned art under the fresco ceiling of the OeAW’s festive hall gives it a new role in the context of knowledge production. Since April 2 and until the beginning of May 2019, this role has been to remind scientists of their responsibility for the future of the world. The initiative “kidsfor-oceans”, founded by Peder, is a recommendation that is certainly worth following up on.

Just as “Fridays for Future” and “Scientists for Future” bear witness to new alliances, just as art and science come together in a new alliance in the two artists featured in the exhibition side by side, both at home in both worlds, just as Anna Artaker and Uwe Sleytr together with Peder Hill, who expresses a new, interdisciplinary alliance, just as all this is the expression of new connections, the Presiding Committee of the Austrian Academy of Sciences has entered into an alliance with the students from Draschestraße. In the festive hall, two different art worlds entered into dialogue with each other. Whales and frescoes mediate over time, delicate

leaves painted with nature’s pencil and powerful, gilded clay sculptures in their colourful reflections mediate between human natures, between ages and sexes.

Art eludes verbal interpretation in a certain respect: as art is always created in the observer, in the observer who resonates with the work of art, writing about art is always writing on the edge of this experience. Writing about art cannot replace looking, experiencing, immersing, being touched. It can, however convey how many references there are between the works of art and invite readers into conversation with the artists.

In the spirit of sustainability as a different kind of awareness, appreciating art should include an appreciation of the crew mounting the works, their diligent use of screws and steel cables, measuring tapes and water spirit levels. Art allows a profound conversation of how all beings are connected and a joint reflection about human nature, about the art of sustainability and about the connections that are needed for it. It is an important contribution to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the minds and hearts of people.

VERENA WINIWARTER

Current Positions

- Professor of Environmental History at the Institute of Social Ecology, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria
- Immediate Past President of the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO)
- Chairperson of the Commission for Interdisciplinary Ecological Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences
- Head of the ZUG, the Centre for Environmental History at the Institute for Social Ecology

Expertise

- Environmental history, history of landscapes, in particular rivers, images, and the environmental history of soils and legacies

Qualifications

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| 1981 | Engineer (Ing.) in technical chemistry, (HTLBVA 17, Vienna) |
| 1991 | MA in history, University of Vienna |
| 1998 | PhD in Environmental History, University of Vienna |
| 2003 | Habilitation in Human Ecology, University of Vienna, Faculty of Natural Sciences |

Career

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| 2010–2015 | Dean of the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies |
| 2003 | Research Fellow St. Gallen University, Switzerland |
| 2003–2006 | APART Fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. With this funding, research fellow at the Institute for Soil Research, University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences and at the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies |
| 1999–2002 | Firnberg Research Fellow, University of Vienna, Institute for Anthropology |
| 1993–1999 | Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies of Austrian Universities: team member |

Please see www.boku.ac.at/zentrum-fuer-umweltgeschichte/mitglieder/verena-winiwarter for more information about the author.