

# The Work of Art in the Age of Material Overproduction.

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I believe today it is quite accurate to define our society as an overproductive one. From an after-war logic of mass production, we slowly moved towards a direct production of waste [1]. The title's resemblance to Walter Benjamin's work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [2] published in 1935, underlines a desire to bring together his time and our current society. Indeed, the importance of the societal and cultural changes happening in 1935 strongly reminded me of our contemporary philosophical, social, and cultural changes. The shift in art's nature due to photography and film reminded me of the discussed and ongoing repositioning of art today. Due to the ecological emergencies we are facing, we are now rethinking the usual position of the Human, until recently always seen at the center of nature [3]. This anthropocentric perspective has deeply influenced our western society. To understand the consequences of separating humans from nature, we will first examine the work of Semâ Bekirović, *Reading by Osmosis, Nature Interpret Us* [4]. There, she interrogates this precise relationship between humans and nature, and more specifically between human art and non-human art. Her reflection on the scientific nature of art will lead us, in the second paragraph, to a reading of the world as an intertwined system, an idea already brought by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in the definition of a rhizomatic thinking [5]. Finally, we will question here the nature of the changes operating today and how the reading of Walter Benjamin's text helps us to understand them.

*Reading by Osmosis, Nature Interprets Us* by Semâ Bekirović was first an exhibition held in Amsterdam during the spring of 2019. I learned about it through its published version, which is not a documentation of the exhibition but a work in its entirety. The original exhibition features different works made by natural elements or beings and acknowledged as such. The different items have been collected by the artist or borrowed from friends or museums. The book shows photographs of those items and an essay by the philosopher Michael Marder *On Art as Planetary Metabolism* [4] about which we will talk later.

“Works by non-human artists, starring the wind, the river Thames, fire, oysters, vines, rain, gravity, crows, lava friction, dogs, pigeon, mud, barnacles, ants, moss, fungi, the North Sea, the sun, sponges, time, a hummingbird, moths, woodworms, a spider, wasps, dust, mice, pigeons, heat, and others.”

This paragraph can be read on the second page of the book and summarizes the words of the artist. So, what is non-human art? In the book, you can see a photograph of a book, which pages are marbled by the development of fungi, a sandal covered by moss, a magazine washed by the rain, and more human-made objects reinvested by nature (see p.4). This encounter of man-made objects and natural elements is familiar. If it has often been interpreted through the romantic ideas of the strength of Nature, the ultimate passing of time, or the ephemeral character of all things, it is now viewed through a different lens [6]. The subtitle of the book “Nature Interpret Us” refers (in opposition) to the traditional place of humans at the center of nature. Arts have for long referred to nature as a source of inspiration. As Humans have been imitating nature or been taking it as a model, it always had been with this distance: humans look at nature as being separated from it. There, art is understood as a reading of nature by humans, and the production of human object as its resulting translation. Semâ Bekirović takes the example of plastics “made from crude oil, which once was biomass”<sup>1</sup>. It is, of course, a similar process applying to all the human objects surrounding us. It is here, in this relation that the artist inverts the scheme and offers a different reading. As the production of human goods has incredibly increased in the last seventy years, the environment of the planet has changed towards a mainly man-made surrounding. The vision of the human being in nature can now be reversed: it is nature that is in the Human world. What nature translates and interacts with is the world around it, as to know today, the human world.

The relation of exchange between humans and nature has now been shown as going in both ways, which is, let us be reminded, a relatively recent and still shy acknowledgment in western societies [7]. But the actual distinction between humans and nature is by itself creating a distance, forcing to position one to another. In the idea of nature interpreting us, Semâ Bekirović invites us to think about the concept of osmosis. If our human objects are an interpretation of nature and nature an interpretation of our objects, we can understand the porosity of both. This idea of exchange between two places divided by a porous membrane is called osmosis. It is a natural process that operates to balance two different environments. The philosopher Michael Marder defines systems functioning this way as metabolisms. At the scale of the planet, it implies that our ecosystem is a surface system, where the environment results from the interaction between the surface of the earth where are the bio-organism and the atmosphere [8]. *In On Art as Planetary Metabolism*, Michael Marder describes

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<sup>1</sup>“We make objects out of the raw materials that we take from nature. These materials have been grown, gathered or mined, and transformed into the utensils and appliances we use every day. Take for instance plastics, made from crude oil, which once was biomass.” [4]

the necessity of all organisms to nourish itself and to reproduce. This is translated into inputs and outputs. For a complex system such as our planet to function this way, it means that some organisms output become the inputs of others. Humans have been using outputs such as crude oil to produce themselves plastics. Plastic here is again understood as an output of Human's surrounding interpretation. The problem here is that this output can't be used as input for any yet existing metabolism on this planet. And not only this, but the amount of output we produce in this case surpasses greatly the number of original inputs. It is, therefore, not a metabolism anymore since the different environments are unbalanced and the porosity non-existent. We can see here how such observation can remind us of the critics addressed by Walter Benjamin. Because of the reproducibility of photography and film, he noticed a loss in Art work's autonomy. The authenticity of the reproduction is more difficult to integrate as an increasing number of copies are produced. The unicity of the input to the output is there again out of balance, and as a consequence, can't function as a metabolism.

Since the times where Walter Benjamin was writing about film and photography, we stretched quite tremendously our perception of authenticity towards the two mediums. As we are constantly improving the technical aspects of both, we can have an understanding of the context as we compare the different material qualities of them. We can now use the distance Walter Benjamin was missing to understand their history and replace them in a context. As he predicted, film and photography did find their place in the art world through the limitation of reproduction available, and so, in a reappearance of the cult of the uniqueness again [2]. There, we can make a distinction between the film and the photography of art and the film and photography of mass. One is restricted in terms of audience and ownership, while the other one finds its place in the market and the daily consumption. As we look today to the number of movies and photographs absorbed every day, we can question our capacity to transform all of them as 'nutriments'. This production is an overproduction and a part of it is directly transformed into waste. Therefore, as the overproduction of human objects clog their transformation for other bio-organisms, we can wonder if this abundance does not clog our cultural and mental receptivity. Moreover, the distinction between the object for the mass and the object of art creates a distance avoiding the understanding of both as part of the same metabolism.

Contemporary society is changing its perception of humans and environments towards being co-dependent and evolutive systems. By looking at nature through a scientific lens, we understand how our societies function on different principles of exchanges. Art here might move towards a metabolic development, where it translates a subconscious absorption of its surrounding into new intellectuals or physical inputs. The question of production, reproduction, and overproduction is today at the heart of Art problematic. I hope that the deeper understanding and acknowledgment of nature will help us answer today's challenges in a logic of integration: whichever our outputs, they need to exist as somebody or something else input.



*Clothes Hangers, branches, Crows*, 2006 [9].



*Bicycle seat*, Mud, 2018 [10].

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