

Disruptive Avant-Garde Art of Today: Shaping Post-Growth Imaginaries for Symbiotic Futures

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Abstract

In order to develop new symbiotic relationships and different imaginaries, it is first necessary to critically restructure the representations of forms of cooperation, which in their positive, desired version usually represent a certain romantic idea of nature and human, and the possibilities for a harmonious model and holistic structure of reality. This can be seen in both eco art and activist ecological agendas, which often play on feelings of harmony and mutual reciprocity, and actually further contribute to a distorted and extremely one-dimensional image of reality. Using the concepts of conviviality and cosmopolitics, the article aims to offer new concepts of symbiosis and symbiotic futures that face today's process of defuturing. The second point of the article is to develop a convincing and solid alternative to the neoliberal view of market-driven models based on competencies and the logic of growth. Therefore, the actual task for disruptive avant-garde art of today should be understood as the decolonization of our imaginaries that perceive nature through the logic of growth and the harmonious model in the direction of shaping post-growth imaginaries for symbiotic futures.

Keywords

Imaginary, conviviality, symbiosis, cosmopolitics, defuturing, (de)growth, posthumanities, intermedia art, artistic disruption.

DOI

10.69564/ISEA2023-23-short-Pranjic-et-al-Disruptive-Avant-Garde-Art

Introduction

At the end of the epidemic, faced with another European war, and shattered by climate disasters, we seem to be facing a similar if not even worse *zeitgeist* to the one of the twenties that called for the avant-garde art and design school Bauhaus to bring a new social, cultural and creative impetus. However, back then there was no experience of the failures of the 20th century artistic and social utopias and movements.

For this reason, we can rightly question any revolution or change through artistic and cultural means.

Nevertheless, new artistic expressions that use new technology and scientific methods to conduct true artistic research are developing novel concepts and opening space for another horizon of experiences that can offer images and ideas of a different future, in which it will be possible not only to survive, but also to thrive in symbiosis with other human and non-human beings.

In order to describe the mentioned process through a deep understanding of how current art contributes to the shaping of our imaginaries for the better future in the age of the Anthropocene, the article will first introduce key concepts, such as “conviviality”, “symbiosis”, “defuturing”, “imaginary”, “growth”, and “post-growth/degrowth,” that comprehensively shape the paradigm, criticized by the artistic projects that are addressing the most burning issues of today, and rightfully represent the contemporary avant-garde. In the last part of the article, we will show three distinct examples of current artworks that seek to participate in transforming the human imagination in the direction of symbiotic futures with a different system of relationship not dependent of industrial and consumerist systems, rooted in the idea of continuous growth.

Living together: Conviviality and Symbiosis

The term conviviality was incorporated to the humanities vocabular by Ivan Illich, who in his work criticized the industrial capitalism and productivity, to instead describe a path of human emancipation and autonomy for reaching convivial life.¹ For Illich conviviality means an “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this, in contrast, with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment.”² Furthermore, because of his instance of the

interdependence among living beings, Illich’s thought is particularly productive in the field of posthumanism to describe interdependence and entanglements between different species, human and non-human agents.

The term “conviviality” comes from Latin *convivere*, which means “to carouse together, live together” (*com* “with, together” and *vivere* “to live”). The more common term “symbiosis” that comes from ancient Greek *σύν* and *βίōσις* similarly denotes living together. Today both of these concepts are equally important in the posthumanism research that emphasizes the importance of exploring relations between human and non-human beings and other entities or matter, and insisting on the theoretical break with anthropocentrism and with the dualisms between human/society and nature.

Conviviality does not mean only relationships of cooperation, but it also includes conflict and tensions as constitutive and necessary part of convivial relations; human beings are understood as a part of the network of players living in symbiosis with others.³ Moreover: “To Illich, the word ‘conviviality’ does not mean joy or light-heartedness; it refers to a society in which modern tools are used by everyone in an integrated and shared manner, without reliance on a body of specialists who control said instruments.”⁴ For Illich *convivial toll* can be used by an individual for a purpose that they choose, and it needs to bring about more freedom, autonomy and creativity (for all beings).

Perceptions of harmonious interactions of symbiosis were critiqued by Isabelle Stengers’ research in thermodynamics to include complexity, processes of disturbance and friction that cause a state of crisis and lead to change.⁵ In her seminal work on “cosmopolitics” Stengers described a “symbiotic agreement” as a part of an “immanent process of ‘reciprocal capture;’” she describes “the event” of symbiosis as “the production of new, immanent modes of existence, and not the recognition of a more powerful interest before which divergent particular interests would have to bow down. Nor is it the consequence of a harmonization that would transcend the egoism of those interests.”⁶

We can further find productive thoughts on this topic in Anna Tsing work on rare matsutake mushroom, in which she presents the complex network of cooperation between human and non-human participants that rejects *stability* as a central goal of relationships, and even *stability* of the term “naturalness”.⁷ Stengers’ and Tsing’s work not only opens to question the foundations of objective (natural and humanities) science, but also shows a new way of connecting and generating

knowledge and possible new imaginaries that can arise from different forms of human activity, which is not necessarily bound to the rationality and authority. Knowledge and science can be, through specific practices and processes, something that we not only discover, but also shape.

Facing Defuturing

To recognize what *is*, we first need to establish active knowledge about how our current dysfunctional relationships of un-sustainability are sustained. One could assume it is truly difficult to be an avant-gardist in the time of *defuturing*, as Tony Fry named our condition in his book *Defuturing. A New Design Philosophy*.⁸ Fry introduced the concept of defuturing as the destruction of the future by design; it means that we live in a world that is taking away futures for ourselves and non-human others. He criticizes Eurocentric, anthropocentric and productivist structures of unsustainability by exploring the history of design that so importantly yet often subliminally coordinates our activities, and influences our thought.

Because our conditions of existence drastically changed, Fry stresses that we also need to drastically change our philosophy of existence and of acting. The new direction for making anything in the world is not a direction within design as-is; within the already established paradigms; it is a direction beyond where design now is. It is also a direction beyond where thought now is. The alternative to this process of “change so that nothing changes” and covering of crisis, would be “informed futuring”, which basically refers to finding the alternative and acquiring the agency in order to create something truly different, an actual change.⁹

For this kind of futuring, a new avant-garde in doing and thinking is needed. Therefore, it is central to look into the past to deconstruct and surpass it. The most significant signifiers of how we do and think things, and how we ascribe value – is growth. Therefore, besides offering a complex image of symbiosis and establishing new and different relationships, it is important to decolonize our imaginary of growth.

Decolonizing our Imaginaries

We can understand “growth” as a centuries-old matrix of thinking that historically constructs Western-civilizational models of meaning-making, collectively and

individually, from various institutional macro and microforms of society. The logic of growth is thus not only rooted in the rational categories that shape our concepts but also in the way we look at the world, how we describe, perceive, and represent it. The stubbornness to fight growth by reformulating capitalist parameters – for example, by establishing concepts like social, human, local, and sustainable “development” – can only lead to new ecological, economic, and social failures.

Agendas such as the New European Bauhaus for example, and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development do seem to be signs of a significant shift toward an awareness about social and environmental health, equality, and justice. However, we need to be critical of the very idea of sustainable development, which remains part of the Western economic imaginary of growth. We can find this critique especially in the works of Serge Latouche¹⁰, who claims that the idea of sustainable development is a mystified and ideologized one that does not bring about any radical turn in thinking but stems from the logic of a compromise.

Consequently, it is unavoidable to start “decolonizing our imaginaries,” a syntagma borrowed from Latouche¹¹, who refers, on the one hand, to the concept of the imaginary by Cornelius Castoriadis¹², and on the other hand, to the anti-imperialist concept of decolonization introduced by anthropologists (e.g., Serge Gruzinski).¹³ If we follow Latouche’s insight, radical change needs another economy; another view of science that would go beyond the concept of Promethean technoscience; another conception of life and death; a different conception of wealth and poverty; another notion of time that would no longer be linear, cumulative, continuous; other conceptions of space; other intergenerational and gender relations; a different concept of work (placing social relations in the center, instead of, e.g., efficiency or value accumulation)¹⁴. Latouche integrates this into an eight-point program with listed imperatives: to re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, re-use, and recycle.¹⁵

Constructing the Imaginary of Post-Growth

One solid set of alternatives to the logics of growth was offered by the introduction of concepts such as post-growth and degrowth. And even though the concept of degrowth as the most optimal future direction of our global society is becoming more and more mainstream,

it is clear we will not achieve any drastic changes in human behavior if we do not address its phenomenological and epistemological implications that could provide us with new models for everyday life.

Neutralizing the disastrous impact of our growth-based society would therefore mean actually using radical avant-garde methods as a unique combination of chance and plan, happening and controlled work in all aspects of thinking and creating for uncertain futures. We see the legacy of the historical avant-garde movements, such as Dadaism and Surrealism, as a plethora of valuable concepts for thinking degrowth that is yet to be researched and applied from the field of art exclusively to the area of social and environmental care, and precisely to *the way* we make and do things. The highly experimental avant-garde presented the most radical possibilities for changing the logic of thinking and perceiving reality, thus showing the opportunities to let new forms and relationships emerge.

And although the avant-garde is all too often perceived as art that sought to demolish and destroy everything that existed before it, it carries within it an extremely affirmative and constructive character: avant-gardes invented a whole series of new formal languages and strategies that are still in use today as fundamental techniques of our modern visual or multimodal communication (e.g., photomontage, collage, avant-garde cinema, advertisements, graphic design typography, new architecture). They sought to formalize the coincidence and freedom of expression and erase any automatization and pre-given cultural definitions.

The avant-gardists' proposition appears to have been precisely what we need today for a symbiotic "metamorphosis in being" as stated by Pasi Haikkurinen, connected with the "practice of releasement" understood as the "new ethos" for degrowth society.^{16,17}

Artistic Disruption for Radical Innovation

We finally come to the acknowledgment of the importance of artistic disruption and art-thinking as the key innovative methodology that may provoke radical change in order to create a meaningful difference from what was (wrong). Which are those new (inter)media and investigative artistic practices involving cutting-edge technologies, critically confronting the European social and cultural values with the aesthetics-, ethics- and tech-related legacies of the historical avant-garde?

By way of conclusion, let us try to briefly discuss three of such topical cases selected among the newest (intermedia) artistic practices:

Vladan Joler's recent hybrid animated info-graphic work entitled *New Extractivism* (2020) visualizes the position of the individual as a user of contemporary information technologies, who is subject to systemic and systematic corporate extraction. Thus, it reveals and critically discusses some of the most pressing issues of modern platform capitalism. The printed materials, which the author considers to be a kind of sci-artistic "assemblage", are presented in the format of a poster and a brochure, and are accompanied by an animation distributed online, supported by the author's own narrative, which he occasionally also delivers as a lecture (performance). By combining the elements of a map and a guidebook, and accompanied by abundant and extremely analytical notes, the work attempts to produce a symbiotic and fractal-like "blueprint of a machine-like superstructure, or a super allegory."¹⁸

Often relying on the approaches of speculative design and advanced computer graphics, as well as info-animations or even physical spatial installations, the works of the interdisciplinary group *Disnovation.org* not only vividly show the paradoxes of the contemporary consumer and hyper-informatized society, but also try to contribute suggestions and tools for resolving them. In the *Post Growth Toolkit* (2020), a set of so-called critical games, they offer a mix of scientific and speculative literary-narrative tools, which should offer the players of this game (or the users of the toolkit) a set of more sustainable solutions for everyday life. *Post Growth Prototypes* (2021) complement the mentioned toolbox with critical (animated video) essays functioning as case studies of advanced and symbiotic concepts such as solar income, radical energy transition, or transcending the Anthropocene via the post-growth paradigm shift, introducing a new responsibility of man towards the biosphere.

As the last truly comprehensive example of an artistic practice that radically questions the human role within ecosystems, we wish to discuss the set of *terra0* projects. Since 2018 various prototype environments have been built on the decentralized (peer-to-peer) blockchain platform Ethereum, which aims to provide automated frameworks for the resilience of a given ecosystem. By establishing a "Decentralized Autonomous Organization" on the upper layers of the earth to govern them, *terra0* research team aims to create technologically augmented ecosystems that are both more resilient and more capable of operating within a predetermined set of rules in the economic sphere, as

independent agents: e.g., the forest independently mines cryptocurrency and decides how it will change its material base. The group believes that modern technologies such as remote sensing and machine learning provide an opportunity to rethink existing inefficient governance and regulatory structures. Moreover, they also seem to suggest how, with appropriate art-thinking and speculative-design based assumptions and interventions, these could play a key role in creating a sustainable, resilient, symbiotic and biodiverse future.

There are more such artistic practices and they bear witness to the engagement of art in order to answer the most pressing questions of our time not only by representing what does not work, but above all to construct, in an avant-garde manner, new symbiotic relationships with human and non-human agents that would contain the full complexity of the symbiotic organization of different entities jointly working to sustain a functional environment, without falling back into the old paradigms shaped by the imaginaries and logics of growth, duality, harmony and stability.

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