

# A human artist in a posthuman world

## Reflections on artmaking and deskilling in the Anthropocene

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### Introduction: artmaking in the Anthropocene

Implied in the title of this text is a sense of ambiguity that afflicts contemporary culture when it seeks to position itself *vis-à-vis* the impending environmental crisis. With the first suggestions that everything in the world today is anthropogenic<sup>1</sup> at least to some degree, we have come to perceive the era we live in as a new geological epoch, which began when our use of the Earth's resources has made irreversible changes to its structure<sup>2</sup>. Artists, together with other cultural producers, find themselves striving to find appropriate tools to address the relationship between humans and their environment, which is marked by a sense of responsibility and grief for the damage that can no longer be undone, while simultaneously trying to envision a world where nature will be able to recover. In essence, the task at hand is to imagine a world "after nature"<sup>3</sup>, but also a world "after humans"<sup>4</sup>. Admittedly, scientifically speaking, this is not necessarily an "either-or" situation, since the ecological catastrophe may likely affect all life forms on the planet. However, when it is considered in the context of the debates on the late capitalist art production, it highlights significant ambiguities and begs the questions about what and how the artist should do to avoid repeating the colossal and calamitous mistake of treating the world as a resource. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari anticipated the posthumanist notion of other-than-human forms of artistic expression<sup>5</sup>, which has become one of the central issues debated within posthumanism. Indeed, to expand our understanding of the artistic, as David Fancy suggests, "could serve as a significant aspect of humans' ability to imagine and negotiate pathways towards postanthropocenic futures"<sup>6</sup>.

In what follows I would like to consider the conditions of artmaking in the Anthropocene and investigate how they inform our perception of art made in response to posthumanism's postulates to include a non-human perspective. In other words, I will propose to examine



<sup>1</sup> The term "Anthropocene" was coined by **P. J. Crutzen** during a conference of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme in Cuernavaca in 2000. He developed his hypothesis in an article published in "Nature" in 2002 (No. 415 [3 January]), where he asserted that the Anthropocene started in 1784 with the invention of the steam engine by J. Watt (*ibidem*, p. 23).

<sup>2</sup> Insofar as the name of this epoch and its starting point are concerned, the opinions vary. For instance, **J. Zalasiewicz** (statement in: *idem [et al.]*, *When Did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level Is Stratigraphically Optimal*, "Quaternary International" 2015, Vol. 383 [5 October]) argues the Anthropocene started in 1945, with the first use of the atomic bomb. Geographers **S. L. Lewis** and **M. M. Maslin** (*Defining the Anthropocene*, "Nature" 2015, No. 519 [12 March]) link the changes in the Earth's atmosphere with the depopulation of the Americas at the turn of the 15th and 16th century and the subsequent reforestation of uncultivated land which led to the decrease of the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the cooling of the climate.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. **J. Purdy**, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 2015; **M. Arias-Maldonado**, *Real Green: Sustainability After the End of Nature*, London 2016; **T. J. Demos**, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin 2016; *Philosophy After Nature*, Ed. **R. Braidotti**, **R. Dolphijn**, London 2017.

<sup>4</sup> **R. Braidotti**, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge 2013. **D. Fancy** (*Geoartistry: Invoking the Postanthropocene via Other-Than-Human Art*, [in:] *Interrogating the Anthropocene: Ecology, Aesthetics, Pedagogy, and the Future in Question*, Ed. **J. Jagodzinski**, Cham 2018, p. 218) describes



this problematic position as an “unresolvable contradiction”, when “humans themselves need to think the postanthropocenic and [...] human thought needs to come to terms with other-than-human forms of artistic creation”.

<sup>5</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Transl. B. Massumi, London – New York 2004, pp. 342–386.

<sup>6</sup> D. Fancy, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> For an outline of the changing meaning of the term see G. Garrels, *Drawing from the Modern 1945–1975*, New York 2005, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> In such readings the focus is on how, in late capitalism, deskilling is less about manual labour and more about knowledge. As W. Marotti (statement in: *idem [et al.]*, *The MFA Degree*, [in:] *What Do Artists Know?*, Ed. J. Elkins, University Park 2012, p. 94) puts it, “deskilling is about losing the knowledge that put you in control of the labour process”. Notably, in this statement, Marotti takes issue with I. Burn’s famous reflections on deskilling as a form of dismissing “manual dexterity” and suggests that Burn misread H. Braverman (*Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1998) and his analysis of the manual as well as intellectual deskilling of labourers in the 20th century.

<sup>10</sup> B. Buchloh, *Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason*, “Art in America” 1988, No. of February.

<sup>11</sup> D. Child (*Working Aesthetics: Labour, Art and Capitalism*, London 2019, p. 22) argues that the sources of this rupture with Modernism were economic rather than artistic: “a reaction [...] to the implementation of a Fordist ideology” came as a “shift to contracted labour and the emergent art fabrication firms”.

<sup>12</sup> J. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Ready-made*, London – New York 2007, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of this process see: D. Beech, *Art and the Politics of Eliminating Handicraft*, “Historical Materialism” 2019, No. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See L. Boltanski, E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2005, p. 444.

<sup>15</sup> See M. Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labour*, [in:] *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Ed. P. Virno, M. Hardt, Minneapolis 1996.

artmaking in the Anthropocene as related to the role of human agency in a (projected) non-human world, inquiring about the status of the artist in the posthumanist art practice. The dependence of the artist’s status on determining her or his skill as artistic or non-artistic is also associated with the ability to mediate between the role of the spokeswoman for the non-human world and the resignation from human agency, which results in the ability of giving space to others. In the quest for possible answers, I will examine selected artworks by the Polish artist Diana Lelonek, whose practice opens up a wider discussion on the strategies employed by an Anthropocene-era artist invested in the task of trying to resolve the “unresolvable contradiction” of working as a human artist from within a posthumanist paradigm. I discuss deskilling as a possible strategy to revoke human artistry and share the artist’s work with other, non-human actors. Since some elements of Lelonek’s practice resonate with problems addressed within the field of design, I also refer to the practice and theory of sustainable design in order to suggest that the logic of deskilling/reskilling is recurrent across different creative practices intersecting in the times of ecological emergency.

### Deskilling as a strategy for a postanthropocenic artist

Since its transmission into the art context in the early 1980s, “deskilling” as a term has stretched beyond its original meaning that implied a practice of delegating control of the manual production of the work to “skilled” workers, such as in Minimalism<sup>7</sup>. More recently the term has been used to denote practices meant to unsettle the romantic paradigm of an all-controlling artistic genius<sup>8</sup>, but also, particularly in the context of the capitalist outsourcing of labour and analyses of precarity in the cultural sector, to address the hierarchies and inequalities inherent in the process of art production and consumption<sup>9</sup>. In a 1988 essay on Hans Haacke, Benjamin Buchloh centres his attention on the idea of artistic autonomy and on deskilling as a mode of its negation<sup>10</sup>. As a rupture with Greenbergian Modernism, this process opened up a space for numerous anti-Modernist practices in the 1960s<sup>11</sup>. However, as John Roberts suggests, this process can be construed as a “deskilling-reskilling” dialectic insofar as the rejection of craft-based skills comes with simultaneous development of new immaterial ones<sup>12</sup>.

In late capitalism we have observed a reskilling of artists, whereby artistic labour is transformed into creative labour of a broader kind, a process that went together with a parallel refashioning of productive labour towards creative labour within the creative industries, but also other knowledge-based industries and the production process at large<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, capitalism has embraced art’s rhetoric of creativity and innovation<sup>14</sup>, demanding from the worker an intellectual and emotional rather than physical investment<sup>15</sup>. As Dave Beech argues:

In the micropolitic of work, the artist is no longer distinct from the worker, but exemplary of the contemporary condition of work. Sociologists have charted the drift towards the activities of the artist, while artists have increasingly perceived themselves as workers<sup>16</sup>.

Particularly important for this process is the understanding of work as an act of self-exploration and self-expression, which redefines all forms of labour as artistic labour but also opens up the possibility of underpaid labour, expected to be performed for the sheer satisfaction and self-fulfilment of the worker<sup>17</sup>. Only very few artists succeed in achieving a status that allows them to use this system to their advantage, for instance by delegating much of their work to assistants<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, those who address the problem of precarious work often end up doing so from a privileged position, while “the emphasis on precariousness runs the risk of erasing crucial differences at the same time as it tries to bring together a disparate group in order to promote a specific argument”<sup>19</sup>.

This problematic nature of the relationship between the artist and her or his *milieu* leads to the situation when artmaking programmed to oppose the capitalist mode of production often ends up complicit in reproducing it. Beech explains this problem as a lack of understanding of the late capitalist conditions of artmaking: “Today, evidently, art is replete with critical practices but typically lacks a clear understanding of the difference between resisting the existing social system and superseding it”<sup>20</sup>. In order to effectively realise projects of social and political relevance, the different politics of art must form alliances, rather than treat each other as rivals, claims Beech<sup>21</sup>.

In what follows I will try to demonstrate how the various politics of artmaking, developed in late capitalist conditions, inform the way the artist’s work is understood in posthumanist art practice and theory, particularly their investment in envisioning and actively practicing a type of artmaking that brings the posthumanist postulates to their desired end. What is at stake here is to conceive of an art practice where the artist’s deskilling comes with simultaneous sharing of artistry with other subjects, in this case, with non-human actors. At the same time, since the condition of nature in the Anthropocene is frail, it is important not to address it from a position of a privileged subject whose art practice thrives by showcasing other, more precarious lives.

### The artist as a plant-spotter

“The new social nexus” in the Anthropocene, writes Christian Alonso:

would have to be forged on the basis of a redefinition of elemental notions such as kinship, interdependence and accountability not only among hu-



<sup>16</sup> D. Beech, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this issue see S. Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, Stanford 2014, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the socio-economic position of artists and the exploitation of artistic labourers see H. Abbing, *Notes on the Exploitation of Poor Artists*, [in:] *Joy Forever: The Political Economy of Social Creativity*, Ed. M. Kozłowski [et al.], London 2014.

<sup>19</sup> A. Dezeuze, *Thriving on Adversity: The Art of Precariousness*, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/thriving-adversity-art-precariousness> (access date: 23.02.2021).

<sup>20</sup> D. Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production*, London 2019, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4. Beech explains that the differences between these political artistic projects entail both the agenda as well as a way to measure art’s efficacy in pursuing it: “At one end of the spectrum, artists appear to be content to provoke members of the public ‘to pause, think, learn, and act’ and at the other end, artists measure the criticality of their work through the actual social changes brought about by it”.



<sup>22</sup> C. Alonso, *Former Nature, Former Human, Former Art: Thresholds of Intensity*, [in:] *Mutating Ecologies in Contemporary Art*, Ed. *idem*, Barcelona 2019, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Works from this series, grouped according to the type of materials on which plants grow, can be found on the project's website: <http://centerforlivingthings.com/collection> (access date: 10.12.2020).

<sup>24</sup> M. Królak, *Pleśń w walce z antropocenem*, <http://notesna6tygodni.pl/?q=pleśń-w-walce-z-antropocenem> (access date: 10.01.2018).

<sup>25</sup> A. Wendzel, *Sztuka roślin*, "Teksty Drukie" 2018, No. 2, p. 274.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 277.

mans but also between non-anthropomorphic and technologically-mediated others<sup>22</sup>.

Art practice has been facing a particular challenge in this respect, inasmuch as the instrumental treatment of art objects is hard to avoid, while the artist's presence – however contested or compromised – will not be willingly dismissed by actors involved in art distribution and sales. Is there a way to connect postulates of posthumanism with the realities of artmaking in a meaningful way? I suggest that deskilling in a posthumanist art practice seeks to resign from artistry construed as an exclusively human domain in favour of understanding nature as creative in a posthuman world – creative in a sense of making new forms from the products of human activity. It is also a practice of envisioning how nature will recreate itself after humans. The artist's skill is then a skill of finding in our present environment the traces of the future visual form of nature's ability to refashion our world into another, yet unknown form of environment.

As part of her *Center for Living Things* (from 2016 onwards)<sup>23</sup>, Lelonek searches for such traces in forests and fields, landfills and garbage plants, roadsides and rail tracks, where she collects leftovers of human production and consumption that have been covered by plants: mostly species commonly found in ruined built environment or polluted areas, such as *Cladonia fimbriata*, several varieties of moss, and berry shrubs. In her statements, the artist emphasises that her practice does not consist in growing plants, but relies on "found objects", which are collected rather than produced, and, moreover, were initially "stumbled upon", rather than actively pursued<sup>24</sup>. In her text on Lelonek's work, Anna Wendzel analyses these acts of collecting discarded objects for which nature found new use in terms of anthropologically construed "gathering" and "trash collecting", suggesting that gathering requires a creative investment and transforms objects or things by inserting them into new cultural circuits<sup>25</sup>.

Wendzel raises a valid point about the consequences of Lelonek's practice for the plants' survival. By their inclusion in the art discourse and her collaboration with scientists the artist secures their well-being and perhaps this way intervenes in what might have been a fleeting, temporary existence<sup>26</sup>. Although Lelonek's work involves engagement of biologists and other experts, and leads the artist to acquire specific scientist skills (i.e. reskilling typical of bio art), I suggest that it is the initial stage of her working with plants, the act of "plant spotting" and gathering new specimens for her institute, that is definitive for the status of her as an artist. Equally so is the choice to resign from the production of new objects or new sets of objects – their new arrangements – in favour of a half-anthropogenic/half-natural readymade.

Lelonek's *Center...* – although rightfully praised for anticipating and predicting what will be or should be included within profession-

al science – constitutes, in my view, works particularly successful in that they aptly capture the specificity of the status of the artist in the Anthropocene. In the era when artists often organise their practice around the notion of participation and expanded authorship, the process of deskilling/reskilling came to manifest itself with artists developing new skills as activists, organisers, and cultural animators. Based on what skill should we then judge artworks that embrace the posthumanist standpoint – where to locate or how to conceptualise what they seek to accomplish? Would it be some kind of efficacy in communicating the ecological agenda, or rather an artistic skill in formulating a posthumanist poetic?

In case of Lelonek it is the readymade that fully illuminates the logic of the new artist in the Anthropocene as plant-spotter – attuned to identifying new hybrid life forms. In reference to a general trend of artists moving away from the studio to the landfill Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin have suggested that this allows art to be both “contentious **and** exploratory”. This continuous shift between these two orders of existence and practice, makes their position “opened up to inquiry in ways that remain inconclusive and open-ended, but nevertheless political and partisan. This ability to sustain contradiction while interrogating the very modes of its production is especially valuable when engaging the scale and scope of the Anthropocene”<sup>27</sup>.

But while Lelonek moves from the studio to the landfill, she also inserts the specimens she finds within an institutional framework of the museum. “Conveying nature into the museum today is arguably a peculiar symptom of Western society’s apparent alienation from the nonhuman environment”, writes Mark A. Cheetham, rightfully interrogating the problematic character of artworks that speak of environmental awareness, yet locate themselves visibly in the institutional frameworks complicit in making this alienation a fact that is accepted as obvious and unavoidable<sup>28</sup>. The author suggests, however, that the proliferation of exhibitions that focus on nature “demonstrates the angst of the Anthropocene and [...] a widespread will to grapple with its issues in the aesthetic”<sup>29</sup>. The evolution of environmentally engaged art in recent decades has led to the perception of the recently abundant shows concerned with the degradation of the natural environment in museum and gallery locations as something of a regress or merely seasonal *vogue*. Art with a clearly activist agenda often finds itself under heavy scrutiny when it fails to offer sufficiently radical means for its radical programming. It is as if art of this kind was expected to advance its formal language together with putting out an ecological message. It is my argument that such demands largely ignore the realities of what Roberts termed “the social technique”<sup>30</sup>, indulging an idea that it is still possible to connect that which is human with that which is not. I suggest that it is, instead, the ability to connect with and communicate to us our fallacious yet still prevailing ideas of nature, Romantic in provenance as they are,



<sup>27</sup> H. Davies, E. Turpin, *Art & Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction*, [in:] *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, Ed. H. Davies, E. Turpin, London 2015, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> M. A. Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s*, University Park 2018, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> J. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 4.



<sup>31</sup> K. FitzGerald, *Skilling Saws and Absorbent Catalogs*, [in:] *idem*, *Volume: Writings on Graphic Design, Music, Art, and Culture*, New York 2010, p. 221.

<sup>32</sup> V. Papanek, *The Green Imperative: Natural Design for the Real World*, New York 1995, p. 8.

that signifies the skills of an Anthropocene-era-artist: the skills to find, collect, and present in a meaningful fashion those elements of the natural world that manifest to its changing condition.

Lelonek offers an institutional framework for the plants at the *Center...*, but also perhaps a safe haven – in this she mimics the scientific and museum discourses but does so with a different purpose in mind. While the insertion of plants in a science/museum setting irrevocably testifies to the history of human control over nature, Lelonek offers a glimpse of the future when the reverse will be the case: when the human-made will serve as a resource for new life forms.

### **(Ir)responsibility of design: deskilling as a path towards sustainability**

In his text on the proximity between a “reskilled” artist and the designer, Kenneth FitzGerald argues that in the late 1980s the notion of deskilling, formulated by Ian Burn and developed by Buchloh, suggested that new skills “must replace what has been abandoned”. Those new skills were no longer singularly artistic, but “identical in form with design”, since “the initial new skill must be the ability to recognise factographic forms as culturally significant and intellectually substantive”<sup>31</sup>. In this optic, the “deskilling-reskilling” dialectic works to bring art and design closer together, but this growing affinity has become particularly pronounced in the agenda shared in recent decades by sustainable design and environmentally engaged art. The development of both entailed a growing awareness of the complicity of commodity culture in environmental degradation. In both we can find ideas for amending this problem through deskilling, as I will try to demonstrate below.

By the late 20th century design theory and practice gained self-awareness in terms of the acutely felt responsibility for over-production, excessive consumption and resulting environmental degradation. In 1995, Victor Papanek published *The Green Imperative*, a full-length book based on several essays he had been publishing since the early 1980s, where he summarised the foundations of his work as an architect and designer and advocated a major rethinking of the role of the designer in a world which manifests that the old ideas of progress have led to the detachment from nature and serious degradation of the natural environment.

Interestingly, Papanek formulated his postulates by framing them around a “repertoire of a designer’s skills and talents”, which include, among others, “the ability of research, organise and innovate”, “the talent to combine from-giving with rigorous technical considerations and with a sense of humane and social factors and aesthetic enchantment”, and “the wisdom to anticipate the environmental, ecological, economic, and political consequences of design intervention”<sup>32</sup>. Looking at the late 20th-century practice, Papanek

recapitulates that while innovativeness had been embraced and celebrated, few designers can demonstrate their consideration for the environmental impact of their work<sup>33</sup>. Though he formulates his thoughts on this matter as an open question, he leaves little doubt as to “whether designers, architects and engineers can be held personally responsible and legally liable for creating tools, objects, appliances, and buildings that bring about environmental deterioration”<sup>34</sup>.

The blame for this state of affairs lies, he suggests, in the excessive focus on the skills that rely on innovation and technical competence and in that, indeed, the two have been treated as a unified recipe for successful design: an ability to contribute to technological advancement. In Papanek’s eyes, progress is difficult to enjoy in a civilisation that “moved backwards” in time, when we can no longer take for granted such staples as “fresh air, pure drinking water, food that is safe to eat”<sup>35</sup>. Rejecting what he perceives as design’s compromised heritage, Papanek advances a type of practice that relies on a form of deskilling, postulating its reorientation towards low-tech and more sustainable solutions. In this optic, a designer fully aware of what is at stake in the relationship between design on the one hand, and environmental and social justice on the other, works to demonstrate the fallacy of the belief that only more technology can alleviate the problems caused by technology (or the designers’ tendency to provide high-tech solutions to each and every crisis, be it environmental, social or even – but perhaps primarily – technological). “In most industrialised countries”, he contends, “people have come to expect a technological fix for every ecological dysfunction”<sup>36</sup>. What Papanek proposes instead is to reorient design so that it no longer relies so heavily on advanced technological solutions, but draws inspiration from traditional systems, natural materials, and sustainable methods of production.

In his book, Papanek offers multiple examples of products and solutions in which his leading premise as a designer was to offer a sustainable alternative in place of that which was unconcerned with the product’s life cycle. Consequently, many of his designs are inspired by vernacular architecture and folk crafts, by simple yet functional and locally accepted designs, as well as by observable natural phenomena. The designer’s talent is praised inasmuch as it is the skill to avoid “too improved” and “too complex” solutions in favour of those that manifest the skill to observe and re-appropriate: a manual knife-sharpener developed from watching shore-birds sharpening their beaks with round stones<sup>37</sup>, or a camera packing utilising organic materials, such as plant fibres from seed-heads that offer natural insulation and protection<sup>38</sup>. His designs utilised found objects, questioning the designer’s core skill to “invent”, but also postulated that this “deskilling” should come with the simultaneous “skilling” of others. This tenet was emphatically manifested in the famous design of the *Tin Can Radio*, designed by Papanek and his student George



<sup>33</sup> V. Papanek (*ibidem*, p. 10) draws a very pessimistic conclusion from his observation of how Western culture had treated the natural environment, formulating claims for environmental and social justice: “We have now truly attained the power to change the natural order of the earth and throw it out of harmony. We manufacture trivial gadgets (electronic tape measures, electric fingernail-dryers, or huge water-guns made from shrilly coloured plastics for children), wasting irreplaceable resources, poisoning the atmosphere during manufacture, and polluting the ground once we have grown tired of them. We cut down forests and create deserts. [...] We dump waste and toxins in the oceans and overfish them. Not only do we threaten other species with extinction, but also tribes of our own species, who rely on an ancient and intricate relationship with their environment”.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.



<sup>39</sup> A debt to Papanek and sustainable design has been acknowledged, i.a., by curators of “Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art”, organised by the Independent Curators International and the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago as a touring exhibition, showcased from October 2005 through December 2008.

<sup>40</sup> This process has been documented by the artist and is available on her website: <http://dianalelonek.com/portfolio/seaberryslagheap> (access date: 3.03.2021).

<sup>41</sup> In her essay, J. B. Bednarek (*Pełzająca katastrofa*, “Widok” 2018, No. 22, <http://www.pismowidok.org/pl/archiwum/2018/22-zobaczyc-antropocen/pelzajaca-katastrofa>[accessdate: 17.02.2021]) suggests that since *Seaberry Slagheap* addresses the changes introduced to the landscape by the mining industry, the project resonates more with what J. W. Moore terms Capitalocene, as a notion that shifts the responsibility for the environmental catastrophe from all humans to those actors (nations and corporations) that were most involved in the development of capitalist global economy.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

Seeger as an easily and cheaply assembled radio receiver made of easily sourced materials such as juice can, paraffin wax and a wick.

Over the years, Papanek’s postulates have been taken up first by critical design and more recently by sustainable design and other practices concerned with the product’s life cycle, such as the zero waste movement or the practice of upcycling, as well as developed into the present efforts towards circular economy and the ideas of the EU’s Green New Deal.

However, Papanek’s call for a conscious deskilling in the strive for planetary justice reverberates also with a great number of contemporary ecologically orientated practices, where the focus is placed on re-use of materials and objects, on the readymade rather than artistically crafted, on collecting rather than making, on appropriating existing ideas and methods, and finally on sharing skills with an increasing number of actors, human and non-human alike<sup>39</sup>.

### The artist as a (deskilled) designer

An approach consistent with that advocated by Papanek features in Lelonek’s work *Seaberry Slagheap* (from 2018), where the artist found, picked, processed and marketed seaberry juice from fruit growing on wastelands left by open-pit mining near the city of Konin in the province of Greater Poland<sup>40</sup>. Developing her work in the context of the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Katowice, she organised it along the lines of an ecologically-driven “rebranding” project and worked like a designer hired to propose an overall new concept for the area’s transformation, developing the new post-mining identity of the region, harvesting the local produce, designing its packaging and even personally engaging in selling it at a temporary stand, hand-made from used pallets. The work addresses a leading theme in Lelonek’s work, which is the condition of the environment in the Anthropocene and the impact of industry and human economy on both global and local realities, and has been analysed in reference to the history of coalmining as a definitive factor in raising the CO<sub>2</sub> level<sup>41</sup>.

What links Lelonek’s strategy in this work with what could be understood as Papanek’s version of environmentally-driven deskilling is the clearly intentional resignation from any innovative high-tech solutions for recultivating the land. The skills required for members of the local community to continue her work are available to anyone with basic knowledge of making food preserves. More importantly, the provisional and essentially unrealistic nature of her project – in the sense that seaberry cannot be industrially resourced and thus its harvesting will not work as a viable business plan<sup>42</sup> – intentionally eschews the logic of design as a practice that has been historically known as a field that unabashedly proposes futuristic, often utopian visions to regions and communities affected by most dire circumstances.



Indeed, as a “masterplan” for the Konin region the *Seaberry Slagheap* is an act of the artist/designer stepping away from the opportunity presented by this “design moment” to give the voice, instead, to the local landscape and community, among others by confounding the “eco aesthetic” of the product with photographs of abandoned houses in areas slated for opencast mining, placed on seaberry jam jars as labels<sup>43</sup>. While the cultivation of the seaberry can, indeed, work as a way for the local community to learn new ways of interacting with the landscape<sup>44</sup>, as a conventional plan for redeveloping the region it is, in a sense, intentionally “disappointing”. By mimicking the practice of a designer on a mission to come up with a vision to transform affected landscape and its community and proposing instead a small-scale community-based homemade production Lelonek subverts the logic of the “design moment” from within. One of the major flaws of design, according to Papanek, is that it offers us solutions and technologies that seem to easily solve our problems, yet in a way that we do not entirely understand. Their complexity passes for expertise. What Lelonek proposes in their place is an opportunity to combat “the deskilling effects of 21st century consumerism” and learn new skills of subsistence and resilience<sup>45</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Anthropocene introduces the labour point of view – in the broadest sense possible – into **geology**. Perhaps the challenge is then to find analogous but different ways to hack other specialised domains of knowledge, to orient them to the situation and the tasks at hand –

writes McKenzie Wark<sup>46</sup>. The task of “hacking” knowledge, but also art as a form of knowledge production, in a similar vein seems particularly urgent now, when so much of how this knowledge is used tends to repeat the fallacy once (or perhaps still?) perpetuated by design: while design sought to solve problems caused by technology by even more technology, art seems to try to alleviate problems caused by culture’s complicity in environmental deterioration by producing more art.

Anthropocene narratives coming from the art world seem to be most potentially destructive when they propose to do something, further reinforcing an attitude of human dominance over the planet. Paradoxically, art initiatives that **stimulate** critical thinking rather than **simulate** action have the potential to be most constructive

– writes Kayla Anderson, in what can be interpreted as a call for less rather than more artistic labour<sup>47</sup>. In this optic, the proposed remedy to the potentially destructive easy solutionism and heroic narratives might be in deskilling, understood as a general outline of the



<sup>43</sup> The “design moment” which can result from “war, (un)natural disasters, [...] urban policies” and other changes, is a **critical juncture** in the history of given site which fundamentally alters its social fabric and landscape. For an explanation of the term in the context of urban design, see: J. A. Wagner, M. Frisch, *Introduction: New Orleans and the Design Moment*, “Journal of Urban Design” 2009, No. 3, p. 238.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, J. Gawkowski (*Seaberry Juice in Extractivist Ruins: The Cosmopolitical Art of Diana Lelonek*, “ArtMargins”, 15 August 2018, [http://artmargins.com/seaberry-juice-in-extractivist-ruins-the-cosmopolitical-art-of-diana-lelonek/?fbclid=IwAR0Xbn\\_Xb3x2dJX960G8Jh35d-J3aZhDZpwLclNcSbU-MDJuc9ssgD9fQ-DOs](http://artmargins.com/seaberry-juice-in-extractivist-ruins-the-cosmopolitical-art-of-diana-lelonek/?fbclid=IwAR0Xbn_Xb3x2dJX960G8Jh35d-J3aZhDZpwLclNcSbU-MDJuc9ssgD9fQ-DOs) [access date: 17.02.2021]) suggests that “the goal of the project is to create a community, in which the local inhabitants can realize the beneficial potential of the seaberry plant that was commonly used in folk treatments. As a result, the community should approach *Hippophae* with care and use it for the common benefit to end the region’s dependence on the heavy industry that poisons both plants and humans”.

<sup>45</sup> Those are among the skills that a new postanthropocenic curriculum will likely seek to develop. See M. Harvey, *Utopia in the Anthropocene: A Change Plan for a Sustainable and Equitable World*, Oxon – New York 2019, p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> M. Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, New York – London 2015, p. 223.

<sup>47</sup> K. Anderson, *Ethics, Ecology, and the Future: Art and Design Face the Anthropocene*, “Leonardo” 2015, No. 4, p. 339.

posthumanist artist's *modus operandi*. Whether as a recourse to the readymade, as a sustainable re-use of existing objects and ideas, or as a way of envisioning art beyond productive and artistic labour, deskilling informs and lies at the core of contemporary but possibly also of future practice.

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**Słowa kluczowe**

*deskilling*, antropocen, posthumanizm, sztuka postantropocentryczna, Diana Lelonek

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### Summary

**KAROLINA KOLENDA (Pedagogical University of Krakow), A human artist in a post-human world: reflections on artmaking and deskilling in the Anthropocene**

This paper discusses the work of the Polish artist Diana Lelonek as an investigation of a possible skillset for the Anthropocene-era artist. An outline of the reflection on deskilling in arts serves to illuminate the process whereby artistic skills are dismissed in favour of other skills. The main argument is that the transformation of the idea of artmaking in late capitalism has accelerated in recent decades with the advent of environmental humanities and posthumanism, which posit the necessity of formulating a vision of artistry that moves beyond the artist's human perspective in order to include non-human subjects. The text refers also to the theory and practice of sustainable design to show that the idea of deskilling as a strategy for the Anthropocene intersects among many disciplines.