Frontiers of the Ecology of Subjectivity

Mikko Snellman
University of Turku
mikko.snellman@utu.fi

Biography

Mikko Snellman is an art educator, researcher and visual artist. As a researcher of art education he is interested in experiential learning, new materialism and bodily knowledge and affect. His dissertation *Kaikuja pimeäästähämärästä metsästä. affekti nykytaiteen oppimisen äärellä ja subjektiviteetin ekologia(ssa)* (Echoes from the Dark Forest: Affect in learning contemporary art and (in) the ecology of subjectivity) has been published by AALTO Arts BOOKS in 2018.
Abstract

In my visual essay I try to enlighten pedagogical space, art making space and the space of research with affectivity and new materialistic approaches. In this I use mainly philosophy of the French thinkers (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) and concepts like affect, becoming-other, striated and smooth space, ecology of subjectivity and . The small art school for children and young people in the remote village in South Ostrobothnia in Finland (Kauhajoki) and contemporary art workshop and in this very workshop the performance art experimentation will all form peripheries of art and education. I will look at questions of subjectivity and ecology through the case of performance in the workshop. Performance art and other fields of contemporary art requires the ability to throw oneself towards the unknown. Art has always the strong bridge to the material contexts, environments, spaces around us. And even more: we are in the deep continuum of materiality-mentality-sociality with art. This forms also our subjectivity, even temporarily, even much before identity. Art offers ways for us to reinvent ourselves in new subjectivities which can be surprising, uncontrollable and yet-unknown to us.

Keywords

Contemporary art, Basic education in arts, Affect theory, Performance, Environmental art, Nomadic research.
Frontiers OF the Ecology OF Subjectivity

There are three fields in my visual essay: research space / art-making space / pedagogical space.

The emphasis here is on the participation in practice in the material production of one’s own subjectivity. The ecology of subjectivity becomes the leading theme, but also the materiality and affectivity of becoming-other, of becoming-minority. This means thinking about subjectivity on a larger scale, social, mental, and ecological. It is a complex process, a kind of existential territory (O’Sullivan, 2010, pp.89–91). It also means thinking about the peripheries. The small art school for children and young people in the remote village in South Ostrobothnia in Finland and its contemporary art workshop, and in this very workshop the performance art experimentation, will all form peripheries of art and education. This means stuttering instead of a well-articulated official language. I will look at questions of subjectivity and ecology through the case of performance in the workshop. There is a strong tendency in the workshop toward the postanthropocentric and planetary immanent materialism.
The spaces (research, art-making, pedagogy) are different but all deal with so-called *striated* and *smooth* space: the former with perspective and measuring, visuality and a power center, and the latter with affect, haptics and fluid space. It is a question of nomadic research. [My explorations are based on my dissertation (Snellman, 2018: *Echoes from the dark forest – affect in learning contemporary art and (in) ecology of subjectivity*) but further reworked.] Alongside all this, the one intriguing question lies also in the composition of the research process / artistic process / pedagogy. Movement between these three sectors and without solidifying any center in them is essential: A movement, a flow from theory and philosophy to artistic production and materiality as well as from virtuality to the pedagogical space where the learning and collaborative process is changing the direction of the research. How can a classroom / workshop be transformed into installation / performance art?

The participation in practice in the material production of one's own subjectivity is the key issue. This is not the same as common identity formation: a narrative. Quite the opposite, contemporary art engages in the production of a new subjectivity which identifies with the minority, whereas the mass media, for example, produces the subjectivity of the majority (Guattari, 2010, p.26; O'Sullivan, 2010). Subjectivity may also be approached from the perspective of ecology, which precisely refers to the surrounding material/discursive reality of temporary engagements. Rosi Braidotti talks about vitalist, self-organizing materiality (Braidotti, 2013, p.82). When intensive encounters are based on instincts, one's consciousness does not necessarily have time to engage in controlling the events. In these cases, subjectivity is shaped by affective encounters for which I have searched in my research material. In my research I tried to follow these kinds of material-affective flows which are transformational even on a molecular level.
My argument is that, again, this change of perspective is rich in alternatives for a renewal of subjectivity.

What would a geo-centered subject look like?

Rosi Braidotti, 2013

In the research workshop on contemporary art in an art school for children and young people in Kauhajoki (in the South Ostrobothnia area of Finland) in spring 2012, we started the workshop by visiting the little forest area near the art school during a cold winter night. We were standing there in the cold, dark forest in total silence. We just opened ourselves to the forest and its very material and real forces: coldness, darkness, snow, tree branches, smells, silence (no talking), stars in the sky ... These affective compounds were resonating and vibrating within the bodies and spaces when we encountered them and even later discussed them in the warmth of the classroom.

This was already a kind of performance, an action, and it started the production in the workshop, although it was not specified or titled as a “performance.” Afterwards in the warm and familiar art classroom we continued by writing down and drawing sketches of the sensations, ideas, and feelings in the forest. Then we proceeded to sketch paintings for the exhibition in the dark and cold forest. We actually constructed the exhibition in the dark cold forest with only head lamps giving us some guidance reflecting on the snow. After the indoor installations, we continued to perform with an open event. The participants did short individual performances as well as group performances on the streets of Kauhajoki and at a local nightclub.

Finally we did performance art together and started it with an open-ended experimentation, Perfo-Diving, as a happening with different materials, costumes, masks, music, drawing, writing on overhead projector and body painting. The idea came from a piece by David Overend, A Work on Progress, which he did at the Glasgow Art Festival 2010 (Overend, 2010). Everything was open, no specific task was ordered, the only advice was to experiment with the materials which were available or to invent new ones. There were also some white masks among the other materials.

At the beginning, this open “diving” into the world of performance was not easy for the participants. The concept was not really explained first, only vaguely. But after a while almost everybody found some material and started to work with it. After one hour, the work was interrupted and the group was asked to
change their outfit somehow. After this the group was introduced to the other location, the future venue of the collective performance, the nightclub at the local hotel. A lot of hesitation was in the air once we went to this location and started to discuss the possibilities to do the collective performance there. The place was kind of strange to the students (which is quite natural since they are minors, aged 13 to 17 years).

After a week, we continued from this. The white masks were offered as a specific material for the collective performance as a tool to use in whatever way. Two students used different masks (a bird one and a golden one). All the others had similar, uniform white masks. Once the planning of the group performance was over the group decided to visit the nearby library with the masks. Another plan was to do “waving the heads in line”; that is, to turn their heads in a continuous movement, one by one.

Unfortunately the library was closed. We had to figure out something else, and we were already on the move with the masks when these decisions were made rapidly. Then we decided to move to the local nightclub. As mentioned, this location had been introduced to the group earlier. Moving with the masks was silent but in a strange way very firm or focused. Breathing and seeing were a little bit difficult, but somehow the masks made us move in a certain way. The participants were aware of the performative nature of the action, but we did not actually have any plan for it. All became improvised by the masks, and quite rapidly, as a matter of fact. No leader of the group was chosen. I tried to suggest somebody, but the group didn’t listen to me. Or they didn’t want any leader. The masks moved with an energy of their own: an affective one.
The forming into a line and the act of doing something previously planned as an organized task can be considered a sign of striated space. It is a space of segmentation, gravitation, perspective, and rule. It is also a space of order and power (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, pp.425–427). Once the group became a little confused due to the fact that what was planned was not possible. Another space opened up quickly into this rigid perspective. We moved to the nightclub ...

After we started moving, walking, nobody knew what would happen, what the outcome would be, why we were doing this or what it was we were doing. But we knew we were moving. Now the white masks were driving us to the next space (or we were already in another space, a smooth one).
Once we walked into the hotel lobby and continued to the downstairs nightclub, it got dark again since there was no disco light on, nor was there music. The space of the nightclub is not reserved for that purpose. Instead, it is a dark open space with some mirrors on the wall, strange benches and other elements here and there. We gathered for some reason in a circle, just like we did when we visited the dark forest for the first time. Then someone started dancing and quickly the others followed the gesture. Then step by step different individual gestures, mimics, expressions of the body, started to happen here and there. Some participants formed assemblages, as moving statues. I had a video camera but I suddenly crawled on the floor like an animal. The bird-woman ran around. The golden masked boy hid on the stairs. A smooth space had been opened up in the nightclub.
Affectivity here does not imply emotions or feelings, even though it is an embodied thing. Affect means exactly a nonhuman becoming of a human. It is a transformative relationship to the world we live in. It breaks the power relations and signifying registers of representations. It is material vitality and intensity. It is a subject of its own. Kind of a ghost, if you will.
Experimentalism and experientialism also offer deeper and rejuvenating affective forces to which one is affirmed by contemporary art as an open space and ethico-aesthetic method. What else may one still become? In my dissertation the most essential concept of “becoming-other” challenges traditional learning by offering new and odd sensations and experiences in oneself, others and the environment. The “method” of silence is also an opposite force to society’s need for control and global threats. There is no need to explain yourself all the time to others, to narrate yourself, but you can rest in the “vacuole of silence.” Performance art and other fields of contemporary art require the ability to throw oneself toward the unknown. There, smooth space, lines of flight, affective and material-sensual forces can take you elsewhere, transform you into another kind. It is also possible to overcome norms and habitual ways of thinking and doing (repeating the same). If the subject changes, everything else must change as well (St. Pierre, 2004).

Contrary to smooth space is striated space, which tends to put everything into “objective” consideration, into a perspective which focuses on one power point, center, and gravitational force. It is also the space of the State apparatus, which means it is connected to institutional power structures. It is the official language, normativity, and science. Smooth space works with the affective-material forces (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, pp.528–546). Of course, smooth space does not suffice to save us, but it gives the possibility for new encounters.

Here we can talk about the Control Societies already mentioned in the early 1990s by Deleuze and Foucault (Deleuze, 1995, pp.177–182). Control Society wants to control us, even our innermost parts, not with threats or punishments, or public humiliation, but through assessments, inner control. The line between public and private space has dissolved. Everything is very public today.

Art offers something different in this respect. the term ethico-aesthetics indicates an alternative way to approach art and the world. Instead of asking what art means, we can ask how it works. What does art do? In this way, art is not in the register of language but intensive encounters with material-affective forces, sensations. Blocs of sensations. Art always makes a strong bridge to the material contexts, environments, and spaces around us. And even more: we
are in the deep continuum of materiality-mentality-sociality with art. This also forms our subjectivity, even way before identity. Identity is meaning-making afterwards, when affective-material forces and intensities have already been at work. Environments, spaces, and situations formulate us. They produce us as constructions which pass by. This is also the ecology of subjectivity, as Félix Guattari has explained (Guattari, 2000). This kind of ecology also includes technologically produced subjectivities, digital prostheses and technological tools which already deeply form our relationship to the world today— and tomorrow for sure even more!

Our world today has also been described through the Posthuman condition as crises in humanities. The human-centered world has become a dead end in many ways. In the so-called Anthropocene Age, our planet is moving toward the human-affected planetary position: human actions on the planet already affect all the ecosystems and violate the natural balance and biosphere. It is all the more important to look at the nonhuman. The Earth. Human/nonhuman relationships. The ecology of the environment, social and mental. This is not the ecology of the specialists or eco-minded green parties, but concerning each
one of us. Combining us. In this kind of ecosophical thinking, our human mind does not control so much; it dissolves into the background and the forces of the nonhuman world are activated (Guattari, 2010, pp.131–145). This is a becoming with the world.

Art offers ways for us to reinvent ourselves in new subjectivities which can be surprising, uncontrollable and yet-unknown to us. Not to close our story to identity narration. Fixed position. How to experiment with our body. How to find new ways of being or in fact becoming and learning. How to resingularize our connection to the world. This also leads to new ethics, or to the ethics of affect, actualizing the possibilities of life! Material vitality! It also leads to new assemblages of people and ideas and activism. Collective experimentation.

Dark ecology means a life approaching a world-for-itself without humans. This is the ethico-political – or if you will, ethico-aesthetic – stance that must be taken into consideration in artistic research (jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013). It’s a planetary consciousness as a dynamism of matter. The Anthropocene means the age of our planet as controlled by humans – also up until its total annihilation. Considering affects in this scene opens up the nonhuman world and its forces as equal to human consciousness and action.

A not-human-centered vision. It’s a question of the future of the Earth. Who does s/he think s/he is? Stygian monochrome? A Dystopia?
References


