

Another Human Reflection

Nikolaj Schultz

Even if I promised to keep this text short, I will begin with an anecdote. Some months before accepting to write this piece, I found myself in Venice, trying to navigate my way through the city to get to a meeting, as the heat suddenly intensified. The city's thick stonewall skeleton seemed to amplify the twenty-something degrees, making it feel like thirty or more. It was hot, I was tired and my legs were heavy, yet I had to keep going. But, the problem was that almost every turn I took seemed wrong, each corner leading to yet another dead end, yet another face-to-face encounter with a canal. First, I turned right, then I took a left, but somehow it brought me back to where I was before, staring at the waters as I had done minutes earlier.

Yes, I was lost in this mythic stone maze – but I was so in a different way than before. Why? Well, because whilst standing there, catching my breath and gazing at the water in the canal, I could not help but feel that it somehow *reflected* me differently than it had the last time I was there, years earlier. Today, I pondered, you see yourself mirrored in this famous lagoon not because the waters are clear, but because they are dirty, and because they are rising, *due to your own being, being there*. A human, a tourist among thousands, perhaps arriving on a CO₂ emitting airplane, polluting the lagoon, and slowly making an ecologically threatened Venice sink...

Walking away, trying again to find my way, it seemed pretty clear to me that the old saying “There are no ends to Venice” really depends on what sort of ends you are looking for. In fact, as far as I could see, there was nothing but ends there. One realisation is that Venice literally is sinking under the pressure of climate change and mass tourism. Another is that by being a person visiting this about-to-be-washed-away place, I was a participant in such endings. And hence, I also had to confront myself with one idea of my ‘subjectivity’ washing away, as Foucault had it coming, whilst another was coming onto shore. “Je est un autre”, said Rimbaud – “Venise est autre” responded Sartre¹. But held up against the waters, the lesson was rather that *I am other, because Venice is other* – and because its new and partly destroyed form takes shape after me and my actions.

The point here is not only how “ecological problems” follow us all in our footsteps, whenever we are, wherever we go or whatever we do. What I hope is clear by now is how it also illustrates how the very condition of the human being has transformed into another *sort of being* and *another sort of existence* than we thought it was. It has turned into a figure that drags a set of destructive traces behind it, traces that it is constantly reminded of. Or, put differently: the human – that *subject* we thought was somehow beyond its *object-Heimat*, or planet – now seems to cast another set of shadows. Shadows that unfortunately remain, no matter how much we look the other direction, destabilising the very life conditions of its own species-Being.

Yes, it's a *double mutation*, a double metamorphosis, that we are facing today – one in which both “the world” that we thought we knew, and “the human” itself, are transforming in a strange, confusing and alarming manner. Why “the world”? Because we are realising that the planet we live on – and that we thought of as stable until very recently – is reacting to our collective human actions, to a level that threatens

its habitability. Why “the human”? Because by being the very *reason* or *cause* behind this planetary metamorphosis, the shape or silhouette of “the human” itself has turned into a different sort of being. Again, as mentioned above, it's not a choice between “I am other” or “the world is other”. It's rather “I am *other* because the world is *other*” – and because I am making it so, on a planetary level.

And hence the significance of Theodor Nymark's exhibition, since it strikes me as engaging *precisely* these sorts of curiosities related to the human being's traces being mirrored in another way, in another world, today. A quick step back, and a reminder: I am neither art scholar nor an art critic, so it isn't my job to evaluate the aesthetic quality of what is at stake here. However, what I nonetheless do dare to state and qualify is that the exhibition takes up points of inquiry that I today consider to be as important to philosophy as they are to the arts. Which questions, again? Questions like: What is perishable and ephemeral and what is not, both regarding the world and when it comes to being human? What is the world, when it reflects human traces in another manner than before? And: what is a *human*, when it realises that it is reflected in the world differently than it used to be? Tough questions, that's true – but not questions that are going to perish themselves any time soon.

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1. Paraphrased from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Venise de ma fenêtre* (1953)