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Glimmers of Interspecies Resurgence in Public Art: A Reinterpretation of Joanna Rajkowska's Oxygenator

Abstract:

The article proposes a new, interspecies interpretation of Joanna Rajkowska's Oxygenator. Read as what Anna Tsing calls latent commons and problematized through Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic spaces, the canonical piece of public art is shown to have been an experimental site of more-than-human resurgence.

Keywords:

interspecies resurgence, public art, Oxygenator, urban ecosystems, ecological aesthetics, agonistic spaces, latent commons

Although it may seem counterintuitive, many contemporary cities are relatively biodiverse ecosystems, especially when compared to rural monocultures or industrial forests.^{1, 2} This is largely thanks to grassroots civic initiatives, activism, and artistic interventions in recent years. The process is bumpy but many cities, including Warsaw, are now sites of various biodiversity-boosting interventions. This is a strategy to make cities more

1) The author received funding from the National Science Centre in the framework of the Etiuda doctoral scholarship (UMO-2020/36/T/HS1/00432/Z-2020/36/T/HS1/00432/1).

2) It needs to be noted, however, that the biodiversity of cities and neighborhoods is often tied to their socioeconomic status. See for example Kuras et al., "Inequality and Biodiversity Often Converge"; Spotswood et al., "The Biological Deserts Fallacy."

livable, especially as we experience the effects of climate change such as intense heat waves. The rising awareness of the benefits of nonhuman nature on human well-being impacts how public spaces in cities are built and maintained. Arguably, public art has been instrumental in fostering this shift, as a site of open-ended experiments. In this short paper, I propose an interspecies interpretation of one of the canonical pieces of Polish public art – Joanna Rajkowska’s *Oxygenator* (2007) – as such an experimental site engendering a form of what Anna Tsing called “latent commons.”³ I chose the *Oxygenator* and not one of the recent artistic initiatives⁴ for the very reason it is not normally interpreted as a more-than-human project, while, I will argue, this is what made it so successful.

One of the main common threads in Anna Tsing’s oeuvre, especially more recently, is the search for local entanglements, interspecies refugia, and sites of resurgence in a world damaged by extractivist practices of expansion.⁵ Importantly, she introduces a distinction between resurgence and proliferation – resurgence leads to flourishing of diversity, not simply a high number of individuals of a single type. In her famous book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing maps the networks of assemblages forming around matsutake mushrooms, among which, in certain places, she finds such “moments of entanglement” enabling common survival, where human and nonhuman allies are found, often unexpectedly. These are what she calls latent commons. “Latent” is explained by the author in two ways – first, although they are quite numerous, we mostly do not notice them, and second, they are a kind of seed, the beginning of something that has yet to develop. “They bubble with unrealized possibilities; they are elusive.”⁶ Finding them requires “arts of noticing,” another term crucial for Tsing. Latent commons go beyond classical definitions of community, as they are interspecies, becoming through (although Tsing does not use this term) what Karen Barad calls intra-actions.⁷ This has far-reaching consequences, as the opening of the community to nonhumans exacerbates the impossibility of purely peaceful coexistence. The best that can be hoped for is that they will be “good enough,” writes Tsing.⁸ “Once we include pests and diseases, we can’t hope for harmony; the lion will not lie down with the lamb. And organisms don’t just eat each other; they also make divergent ecologies. Latent commons are those mutualist and nonantagonistic entanglements found within the play of this confusion.”⁹ I will return to the issue of antagonism in a moment, as I will want to problematize this quote a bit. These communities are both inclusive and exclusive; the meaning of “good enough” is, therefore, subject to constant revision. By their changeable nature and bubbling with possibilities, they do not submit to institutionalization, which they constantly evade — the latent commons that are found will be of no use as universal models on which to directly base, for example, pro-environmental policies. They are the runaway that thrives, Tsing writes, in the cracks between laws, they are fostered by inattention. Finally, latent commons will not save us from disaster, it is uncontrollable, happening “here and now, amidst the trouble.”¹⁰ Tsing explains this negative definition by the very nature of latent commons, which cannot be transformed into positive projects:

3) Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 255.

4) There is currently a vast group of artists whose work deals with human-nonhuman entanglements in cities, in Poland they include, notably: Diana Lelonek, Cecylia Malik, Karolina Żyniewicz, Paweł Matyszewski, and Katarzyna Przewańska, as well as group projects, such as “Miastozdiziczenie.”

5) See for example Tsing, “Threat to Holocene Resurgence”; Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*; Tsing, “Getting by in Terrifying Times”; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

6) Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 255.

7) Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

8) Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 255.

9) Ibid.

10) Ibid.

It makes no sense to crystallize first principles or seek natural laws that generate best cases. Instead, I practice arts of noticing. I comb through the mess of existing worlds-in-the-making, looking for treasures – each distinctive and unlikely to be found again, at least in that form.¹¹

Although elusive to laws, perhaps latent commons can be fostered by art. This is where I would like to go back to the “nonantagonistic” character of these entanglements as described by Tsing and nonetheless read them through Chantal Mouffe’s concept of agonistic spaces, which are not without inherent antagonism.¹² Although Mouffe focuses exclusively on human-human relations, I propose to apply her conclusions to interspecies relations, and this way combining the two perspectives, look at the Oxygenator as an example of latent commons, a potential source of multispecies resurgence.

Mouffe sees an important role for art in the construction of alternatives to the existing political systems and calls for “widening the field of artistic intervention, by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism. The objective should be to undermine the imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction.”¹³ For this to happen, however, it is necessary to take into account both the antagonistic and contingent nature of political systems. For the purposes of this paper, I extend the understanding of a political system (understood as a model for the organization and management of interests and conflicts within a particular community) to the system of organization of interspecies relations. It is therefore one of the roles of art to disrupt the imaginary necessary for the reproduction of hierarchies and anthropocentrism of human-nonhuman relationships. According to Mouffe, there is no rational solution to the antagonistic dimension of the political sphere. The philosopher points out that her understanding of agonism differs from that of Hanna Arendt, who on the one hand, emphasizes the multiplicity of human interests and stresses that the object of politics is community and reciprocity in relations between people who differ from each other, but on the other hand never admits that this multiplicity is at the root of antagonistic conflicts that cannot be avoided.¹⁴ For Mouffe, it is the fundamental inalienability of conflict, and not just difference, that provides the starting point for building democratic political relations. From the perspective of interspecies relations, then, this means that the vision of harmonious coexistence as the goal must be abandoned, or rather, the understanding of harmonious coexistence must be extended to include eating one another, as is the case even in the most stable ecosystems. It requires abandoning the hope that all needs can be met. This contingency and agonism resonate both with Tsing’s concept of latent commons and the fundamental precarity of naturecultural assemblages. It should be noted that Mouffe describes the inalienable features of the political space as such, and Tsing’s concept of latent commons points to exceptions in interspecies environmental relations – but even there it will not be possible to avoid competing interests and conflict.

According to Mouffe, art can uncover what is hidden beneath sedimented socio-cultural practices that have ossified over time, building the illusion of a natural order and a common sense to political systems.¹⁵ Meanwhile, political systems are the result of these sedimented practices of hegemony, not a manifestation of a deeper truth external to them. Similarly, as can be seen in the human-nonhuman relationships, assumptions about what is natural and what is artificial, living and dead, are contingent and changeable results of sedimented practices of the Anthropocene. The symbolism of layered sedimentation used by Mouffe resonates with the

11) Ibid.

12) Mouffe writes about this in detail in: Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*. See especially Chapter 4.

13) Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” 1.

14) Ibid., 4.

15) Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces.”

intuitions embodied in the notion of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch in which not only microplastics are deposited on the ocean floor and smog partitions on glaciers, but they are accompanied by layers of epistemic sediments of the capitalist, extractivist practices of the plantation.¹⁶

Joanna Rajkowska's Oxygenator is one of the best-known works of contemporary Polish public art. Even though it only lasted a few months, it still echoes in the debate about art's capacity to impact social change.¹⁷ The Oxygenator does not directly refer to human-nonhuman relationships, it is the artist's reaction to social atomization, ossification of conflicts, and sterilization of urban space. However, it represents an extremely productive and inspiring strategy for living among the rubble of late capitalism, and as I will try to demonstrate, its success is based largely on the interspecies nature of the community it brought into being.

The Oxygenator was active from July to September 2007 on Grzybowski Square in Warsaw. An intervention in public space, it consisted of a pond of about 140m², surrounded by specially planted vegetation, benches, and rock-like seating for visitors. In the pond there were water plants, lilies, and nenuphars, there were fish, and equipment producing mist and ozonizing the air. Thanks to the machinery, the Oxygenator produced its own microclimate. In the immediate vicinity of Grzybowski Square, which was one of the boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II, there is now a synagogue and the Catholic Church of All Saints, decaying tenements, post-war blocks of flats, and new glass office buildings scattered all around. A few years later, the area around Grzybowski Square underwent a major "revitalization" and a series of renovations, but in 2007 it was a grey place through which people flitted to their separate, parallel worlds, never meeting or interacting. There was no communal space. The memorial site was often visited by tourists from Israel, you could feel the past and the conflict in the air, said Rajkowska, it hung heavy over this part of the city.¹⁸ As we read on the artist's website, the Oxygenator's

Temporariness, unusualness, lack of a pre-adopted script create a space that only others can fill. The artist makes the initial gesture, which will be developed and interpreted outside her control – during the project's two month existence and in the course of all the more or less accidental events that will take place around it. The pond installation is an intervention firmly rooted in a specific context, a distortion of the place's hitherto order. It does not propose a single viewpoint instead, but rather suspends the everyday patterns, and creates a potential space besides – but, at the same time, very much here and now – a space open to interaction and communication. This intense here and now, in a place so traumatised, fragmented, and claimed by no one, is to become a clean, open field, a kind of new beginning.¹⁹

The city authorities decided not to extend the project and the Oxygenator was bulldozed. Today, the square is a typical piece of contemporary urban design with some greenery and benches, there is even a small pond.²⁰

16) For more on the plantation and Plantationocene see Mitman, *Reflections on the Plantationocene*; Davis, Moulton, Van Sant, and Williams. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?"; Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin."

17) See for example Berendt, "Nie Taka Znowu Słaba"; Jopek, *Wolałabym Nie*; and Domańska, "Sprawiedliwość Epistemiczna w Humanistyce Zaangażowanej."

18) Kowalska and Rajkowska, "Iluzjo, Trwaj!"

19) "Oxygenator 2007."

20) The public tender announced for the rebuilding of the square invited a very similar concept to the Oxygenator, but the artist was not invited to participate. As a result, Rajkowska and the team involved in the creation of the piece published a text "This is not the Oxygenator"; see Rajkowska, Pawełek, and Walczyna, "To Nie Jest Dotleniacz."

But something about it is different. While it was in operation, the Oxygenator created an *ad hoc* community, a place for chance meetings, interactions, and alliances. In an interview with Magda Raczyńska, Rajkowska stated that

The Oxygenator is the only critical art project that awoke the spirit of civic society in the Radio Maryja listeners signing petitions in its defence. (Radio Maryja is supported chiefly by poorly educated, low-income elderly women, and is considered to be the voice of the xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and pro-Vatican part of the Polish Catholic church). That could be some kind of introduction, but the left would surely want much more. But, in terms of the politics of antagonism, there isn't much more here. Conflicts remain unsolved, and even not fully revealed. No battlefield is defined, there's no anger, not even the 'us' vs. 'them' division. The anti-Semites appear ridiculous in that place – I myself heard ladies there making fun of other ladies who listen to Radio Maryja and refuse to visit the Oxygenator because of its close proximity to the synagogue. Militant Jews would be ridiculous as well. The monument of the Volhynia victims has also become ridiculous. What has been revealed is an immense craving for an alternative to the familiar lines of division, a sense of weariness with conflict, a need for other strategies. Everything has been dissolved. What remains is a mirage.²¹

Thus, the Oxygenator was a unique example of latent commons, because in the space of sedimented, sometimes hidden conflicts, it did not build a permanent platform of understanding and instead, only for a moment, the conflict was replaced “by a fragment of paradise – the ozone, the water lilies, all that has eliminated conflict.”

²² The key, however, is its momentary, flickering nature. The Oxygenator was not a bandage that covered the wound, which would cut off the access to oxygen, causing an infection of the whole (social) organism. The artist's strategy is “generating a momentary vision, a bit like a mirage, where all the reasons lose their validity, where the moments when people err and go astray are no longer important, where the conflict-generating positions become ineffective.”²³ With a momentary respite from the usual, repeating arguments that have never led to reconciliation, people can sit together for a moment, and breathe. “After all, the Oxygenator hasn't solved any controversial issues, they are still there. It's only that the people are different for a moment. And then they return to their lives. I think they're left with an after-image.”²⁴ Rajkowska creates a unique role for herself as an artist, which she emphasizes when talking about the differences between her and Artur Żmijewski's strategies, she wants neither to diagnose nor to organize a round table, but to suspend the existing narratives, all arguments, and reasons, to create a space for something completely new.²⁵ There are certain resonances with Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics²⁶ here, but I would argue the Oxygenator manages to escape some of that model's main pitfalls, thanks in part to the fact that it is located in public space, where neither the artist nor the curators control who uses the work and how.

However, full suspension of conflict can be only illusory, some nuance is necessary. An attempt to frame the sedimented antagonisms in their entirety outside the work of art would risk trivializing it, the conflict is also

21) Raczyńska and Rajkowska, “Milliondimensional Reality.”

22) Ibid.

23) Ibid.

24) Ibid.

25) Ibid.

26) Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Cf. Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.”

multiform (or “milliondimensional,” as Rajkowska puts it). The artist does not play the role of judge, accuser, or mediator – her role is both more modest and more momentous. She builds a place where people can sit on benches near the pond, watch the fish, and breathe in the cool, humidified air.²⁷ Just a tiny park. On the other hand, she creates a small paradise, which momentarily takes those who visit it beyond the conflicts, which is a demiurgic gesture. This duality is why the fluttering, ephemeral, but also open and experimental nature of this artistic gesture is so important; Rajkowska does not foster the hope that she will create a “Habermasian perfect public sphere,”²⁸ this is not her goal. After leaving paradise, visitors return to the world of their unresolved conflicts. What remains is an afterimage and a mirage. Instead of a fully controlled laboratory, she works directly on the fabric of the city. This tension between the modest and momentous role of the artist is also reflected in how Rajkowska approaches the relationship between passivity and action, being and acting, rather than

the constant transforming, planning, polishing of your craft or language, because that narrows everything... . You're so focused on constructing the instruments of transformation that you no longer see what you're supposed to transform... . This element of passivity, of being a kind of receiver, a seismograph, without presuppositions, without the already constructed research instrument, is an absolutely fundamental thing. To surrender after all, to try and test reality on yourself, so that it transforms you, runs over you like a tank.²⁹

Through Art, Reality Shatters the Discourse

As I already mentioned, the Oxygenator has been analyzed countless times from the perspective of human communities, it is not the aim of this paper to reconstruct this debate. Instead, I will offer a reading of Rajkowska's project from the perspective of interspecies communities in the city, as a counter-catastrophic strategy for the Anthropocene. The urban catastrophe against which the Oxygenator can be positioned is fundamentally naturecultural – a dry, paved city, where the air is poisoned by smog, where the atomized community cannot come together, despite or perhaps because of, its low (bio)diversity. Also, the conflicts Rajkowska speaks of can be extended to interspecies relations. Not only nonhumans suffer from the displacement of nonhuman nature from the city, but the humans who live there feel the effects of the “concrete monoculture” on their own bodies. By creating an interspecies community, the *Oxygenator* in its own way prefigures current phenomena in art, which is more readily apparent today, when human-nonhuman entanglements have taken center stage in aesthetics, philosophy, and art theory. This may not have been the main angle when the piece was made, but today reading *Oxygenator* through the nonhuman comes naturally. Today it seems obvious. Rajkowska has repeatedly stressed that her goal was not to create a space of debate, but a place where people sit silently looking at fish and mist. Thus, the essential intra-action catalyzed by the installation takes place between the nonhumans who create the space, the visiting humans, the equipment, and the surrounding city. It would not have been the same outside of a city, or even in a middle of a big urban park. Rajkowska's intervention, creating a small paradise in Grzybowski Square, is further internally balanced by the presence of technology. Arguing

27) Breathing ozone is not good for one's health. I did not find information whether the artist was aware of that, or perhaps the ozone was meant to “sanitize” the atmosphere.

28) Raczynska and Rajkowska, “Milliondimensional Reality.”

29) Ibid.

with the artist's description of the piece as a mirage, Ewa Domańska called it a micro-utopia, a real possibility for a different social practice.³⁰ An interspecies social practice, I would add. Without the plants and the fish, and the flying insects, and visiting birds it would not have worked the way it did. The entire project with its community-building impact, I would argue, hinges on the presence of nonhumans.

The machinery that creates the microclimate of the Oxygenator played an important role in creating an aura of eeriness about the place. Rajkowska invokes the Lyotardian borderzone – a frontier area in which momentary agreement, happening by exception, is possible.³¹ Such momentary agreement can take place because it does not happen according to scripts, codes, or established models of behavior, but *ad hoc*; it can be clumsy and awkward. Hastily, a new ritual must be created. These assumptions by Rajkowska clearly resonate with the category of latent commons. The Oxygenator is a holiday, a celebration, it could not be institutionalized and universalized, and serve as a model for urban parks. But perhaps, following Tsing's suggestion to look for latent commons, to practice the art of noticing, we can see something new in Rajkowska's project. The construction and, even more so, the decommissioning of the Oxygenator also involved the instrumental use and probably killing of nonhuman beings (what was the fate of the plants and fish?) The artist herself pointed this out in one of the interviews,³² but it did not become a prominent aspect of the discourse surrounding the piece. If the Oxygenator was created today, such a discussion would most certainly be central to the debate. This is an important change, and it constitutes part of a broader shift in art reception and theory, which I propose to call ecological aesthetics of (counter)catastrophe.³³

The celebration created by the Oxygenator becomes an element of the everyday life of the people who visit it, says Rajkowska; it wedges itself into that everyday life.³⁴ That is why it is an activity quite different from going to a museum, where in controlled, laboratory conditions the artist can experiment with the viewer. Balancing on the border between the everyday recreational space and a work of art, the Oxygenator is an open experiment or rather an experiment in opening. It is the aura of festivity introduced by the artwork that brings up the wonder in ordinary encounters. And although the intention was mainly for human-human relations, I believe this was also true of human-nonhuman encounters. Had the Oxygenator been given more time, it would have created a broader ecosystem, with new plants, animals, and fungi. But even in its fleeting, ephemeral form, I would argue, Rajkowska's public intervention asked the audience to revisit their everyday relationships with urban ecosystems. For a moment, the "nature" of the Oxygenator seduced them, and the hypnotizing, disappearing mist created a chance for a momentary crack to appear on the smooth surface of humanity through which some wonder can come in. Below is a longer excerpt from Rajkowska's conversation with Raczyńska, I believe that in its entirety it can be read as referring to human-nonhuman conflicts.

You don't know what to do; there are no manuals to be consulted. And you're about to address another person. This is precisely what dissolves conflict. The inconvenience, awkwardness, lack of behavior codes. Because you have to create some new ritual of addressing the other person, and

30) Domańska, "Prefigurative Art and Micro-Utopias."

31) See Lyotard, *The Differend*.

32) Rajkowska and Pawełek, "Joanna Rajkowska talks to Kaja Pawełek, curator of Oxygenator."

33) This is the subject of my doctoral thesis, which at the time this is written is in review and which the results presented in this paper are part of. In the thesis, I trace the emergence of a separate field of artistic and theoretical practices that are a reworking of ecological aesthetics and the premises of an aesthetics with novel material and methodological scope, which I propose to call ecological aesthetics of (counter)catastrophe.

34) Raczyńska and Rajkowska, "Milliondimensional Reality."

how that person is going to react you don't know either. For me, the key to everything is precisely this moment of helplessness in the artist's position towards the world, which is then repeated in the project's reception, when people really don't know what to do. Because unless you surrender yourself, unless you decide that you're tiny and helpless towards reality, which has a zillion forms, and you remain intent on creating, changing, constructing a positive project with a specific goal, then you start reducing reality. You simply stop seeing.³⁵

If you read the Oxygenator as a framework for more-than-human encounters, it becomes an opening for the creation of interspecies urban spaces. Parks, roadside greenery, and flower beds are mostly only a means to the end of making cities more human-friendly. Admittedly, as I mentioned in the introduction, in recent years there has been a shift in attitudes toward urban nature, where nonhumans are increasingly treated as urban residents, but these changes have been rather slow.³⁶ In his book, *Plant Theory*, Jeffrey Nealon draws attention to a phenomenon at the other end of the scale: in many respects, all life forms are beginning to be treated as plant-like (which can be understood as a form of capitalist biopolitics) – both humans and nonhumans are being “cultivated.” Nealon thus points out the dangers hidden in uncritically accepting (broadly understood) posthumanist demands for the abolition of boundaries between life forms.³⁷ The radical openness of the Oxygenator, however, disrupts the totalizing strategies of urban multi-species plantations, in favor of *ad hoc* interspecies intra-actions.

This short paper proposed a reading of Joanna Rajkowska's Oxygenator as a figuration of what Anna Tsing calls latent commons, arising between living organisms (people, plants, animals), fostered by elements of urban architecture and mist-producing machinery. This canonical piece of public art is not unique in this respect, but it was arguably one of the pioneering works actively offering “good enough” assemblages and providing hints on how to live together in a big city on a damaged planet. As Tsing reminds us, “[at] best we are looking for a most ephemeral glimmer. But, living with indeterminacy, such glimmers are the political.”³⁸ Despite the conflicts it contained within it, the Oxygenator invited attentiveness and fostered intra-actions between actors who would not have met otherwise. Through its materiality, the coolness of the mist, the movement of the fish, and the proximity of sitting next to other people, this piece created a tiny disruption in the Anthropocenic catastrophe that is a big city that succeeds in pushing out most forms of nonhuman life. Even though it was there only for a couple of months, thanks to its lasting presence in our shared imaginary, the Oxygenator continues to engender discussions of globally important issues from a local perspective, especially, as I attempted to show, in an interspecies interpretation.

35) Ibid.

36) These changes are visible both in research on the urban, as well as social activism, artistic interventions, and city politics. See for example Bakke, *Refugia*; Stoetzer, “Ruderal Ecologies”; and Braun, “Environmental Issues.” Recent city projects include Warsaw: <https://um.warszawa.pl/-/ekologiczna-transformacja-w-stolicy-zielen-zamiast-betonu> (accessed May 25, 2023), and Krakow: <https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,29555869,jak-krakow-uwalnia-drzewa-spod-betonu-zaczelo-sie-od-budzetu.html> (accessed May 25, 2023).

37) Nealon, *Plant Theory*.

38) Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 255.

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