

What endures? – some words on the ontological crisis

Each in their own way, the works in Vantaa Art Museum Artsi's *From Form to Surface* exhibition ask questions about the places of human and humanless life, of living and dead matter, in today's world marked by environmental crises. The issues being put to the test here are about the material and about the endurance of meaning. How are we to understand the impending crisis and the endurance that this entails?

1st starting point. Even without the climate catastrophe, the planetary situation would be in many respects unsustainable. And yet, the Earth's biosphere is the only known life-support system in the cosmos, and its ability to sustain life is not the result of efforts by any human group, not to mention by humankind as a whole. "The only known life-support system" implies that the current cluster of ecocatastrophes is not

primarily existential, i.e. affecting human existence and its meaning. What is imminent and ongoing is an ontological crisis, i.e. a crisis of forms of being, which puts to the test not only the meanings or meaninglessnesses that human life ascribes to those forms of being, but even more the preconditions for beingnesses as such.

2nd starting point. Humanness, in all its multiplicity, is not limited to the human being – even the most rudimentary understanding of humanness requires being exposed to and put to the test by the non-human. Without the aid of other living beings, without the open, unresolved questions that they raise, human self-understanding is irredeemably lost. Those questions are lost to thought, in other words they are resolved, as species are destroyed and their habitats depleted. Since, when

species and their networks disappear, what also disappears, massively and irrevocably, is non-human knowledge that has frequently accumulated over millions of years, and which is actually necessary for the development of enduring cultures.

Question. So, people ask, what in the ontological reality of the crisis might be sustainable, both humanly and despite the human, in human and non-human cultures. Not necessarily something that is preserved as it is, and which will survive on its own, nothing familiarly pleasant or bourgeoisly safe. What makes the question of sustainability abhorrent is that, ultimately, that which endures is not what is called ‘ethical’, nor, by any yardstick, is it necessarily even good.

The question arises in a situation in which lifeworlds are being destroyed at an ever-increasing pace, as the

essential prerequisites for the life of species, languages, individuals of a species and speakers of a language decline, often irreversibly. These lifeworlds are frequently mutually untranslatable, and even contradictory, but even in their differences fatefully interconnected, without being one and the same thing. These serial endings are rarely given voice and it can be impossible to envisage them – hence it is frequently hard even to imagine, never mind remember, them.

Instead of thoughts of lamentable abhorrence, people typically respond to the situation with well-meaning talk of the intrinsic value of nature or of the human being. But, as ideals, values rarely induce commitment of sufficient determination, and if they do induce commitment, it is usually to the humanly existential at the expense of the non-humanly ontological. Hierarchies of meaningful-

ness, like those of values, are thus at most a secondary requirement. What is primarily lacking is the ability and the binding agent to live a meaningful life that is shared for generations within the fabric and weave of the living/dying, with them and face to face with them, artfully, and well. This learning to live is made more difficult, or is at least slowed down, by the way that credible sustainability is ultimately constructed superindividually and supergenerationally, and perhaps as surreptitiously as the current high-cultural unsustainability has been planetarized. In other words, it has been symptomatically actively forgotten that no truly sustainable structure exists that can be credited to the individual-human skills characteristic of the present day. That is why “endurance” is not a fundamentally human value, but perhaps more of a skill and method for living differently borne up and driven by non-

human cultures. An enduring good is thus a non-human side-effect, a fortuitously skilled coincidence, possibly even an accident and a by-product.

Art is ideal for attracting such lucky accidents and supposed randomness. If art’s special skill is in experientializing strangeness and anomaly, it is fundamental research into living differently. Living differently, i.e. experiencing differently: being exposed to things and challenged, putting things to the test and being tested, surprise and adjustment, an unforced acceptance of the irrevocable and inevitable, but without fatalism.

The artistic gestures and works in this exhibition can, as it were, reveal the nebulousness, the starkness, the entanglement of the ends (and beginnings) of worlds, all of that manifold reality of uncertainty in which a once-only life in this instance subsides,

withdraws and goes out. Observing these evaporations requires an understanding of what is unique in the unique, what is quality in quality, the little in the little, and the much in the much: it requires a feel for knowledge that is hard to know, test, or even detect. For instance, even normal science is incapable of this, since, in its claims to objectivity, it can only investigate the repeated and repeatable, and never that which exists once and only once.

To put it in seemingly contradictory terms: it is ultimately only the unique that endures. Only that which is capable of disappearing can be meaningfully preserved. The enduring is formless. Since only in the realness of the once-only is it possible to admit the temporality, the finiteness, and the intense fragility that today's hubristic fossil capitalism seeks to pulverize.

That is why we need the obser-

vation, the desire and the experience cultivated by art – exposure to the strange, the exceptional and the residual is capable of breaking down habits of perception and feel for the material, of liberating mind, language and understanding. This grasp of difference in kind can be called transformative understanding, as distinct from knowledge, which seeks to produce definite scientific facts or incontestable data. It is capable, consciously or unconsciously, of changing life and being in themselves: it has an ontological function. Transformative, i.e. form-changing, understanding is typically borne up by long, supergenerational traditions, and to the extent that a supergenerational past and future of non-human origin are under threat, this species bank of knowledge is, despite the planetary situation, despite everything, also the lifeblood of sustainable cultures. Since, if it is destroyed, it can be reborn. But

that requires a great deal of time and a great deal of art.

Summary. Art takes us to the edge, in the senses of bringing us face to face with things and of taking us to an extreme. On this occasion, face to face with and to the brink of the existential crisis, from where the ontological begins; face to face with and to the brink of the crisis of human self-understanding, which has revealed itself as a sensory breakthrough of the non-human; to the mutual limitations of the living and the dying, to the unsustainable form of the unique, and to the endurance of the formless... it is from these edges that we have to leap, to leap over, to leap into shapes that are seeking the form for the next preconditions for life.

Antti Salminen