

Under the More-Than-Human Condition:

How Does Research-Based Art Engage the Planetary Crises of Climate Change and Social Catastrophes?

Hai Ren

In the context of climate change and environmental degradation, mass media, governmental, and non-governmental organizations consistently emphasize the urgency of taking actions, such as reducing carbon dioxide levels.¹ However, what forms of action are appropriate in this context? Notably, does “action” here solely refer to human action?

According to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, action is a fundamental aspect of the human condition that defines the essence of humanity. In *The Human Condition*,² Arendt argues that the human condition is constituted by three inseparable components: “labor” (necessities of life), “work” (production or creation that transcends the duration of a human life), and “action” (the meanings of humanity that depend on the co-presence or contemporaneity of humans). Among Arendt’s three dimensions, “action” as human action means living an “active life” (*vita activa*), which entails actively participating in public life and working with other humans in the city modeled after the Greek polis.

The city has become a predominant context in which most of the world’s populations live. According to the UNESCO, “cities are home to more than half of the world’s population and represent three quarters of its economic activity, including a large share of the creative economy.”³ Urbanization and economic development, as well as the challenges they have created, have become inseparable. To “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development stipulates that “we need new, intelligent urban planning that creates safe, affordable and resilient cities with green and culturally inspiring living conditions.”⁴ Does Arendt’s model of the human condition align with this urban strategy that addresses environmental issues in the urban context? How do city-based human actions engage non-human entities to address planetary challenges such as climate change or environmental degradation that go beyond the urban context?

To reevaluate the notion of the human within the universally accepted understanding of human action and acknowledge a multi-species relationality as a “necessary, pre-existing ground of life”⁵ under the planetary condition of climate change, I propose a concept of the more-than-human condition. I maintain that all of Arendt’s three dimensions of the human condition – labor, work, and action – need be expanded as more-than-human when we artfully situate human lives within “networks of solidarity between human sensibility and

nonhuman vitalism in addressing environmental degradation and climate change as issues of the habitable infrastructure that binds humans to nonhumans.”⁶

In reframing the three components (labor, work, and action) of the human condition as more-than-human, we reevaluate the city modeled after the Greek polis. This entails going beyond anthropocentrism by embracing what the indigenous scholar Ailton Krenak calls a nonhuman-centric “worlding,” a way in which we “experience other worlds, which opens up to other cosmovisions and manages to imagine pluriverses.”⁷ In the urban context, for instance, we can “reforest our imagination” by making the forest exist within us, within our homes, within our yards.⁸ Instead of investing the future of the humanities in the colonization of other planets, we should focus on our habitats where humans and nonhumans coexist. For Krenak, the rivers are “beings that have always inhabited different worlds” and thus can afford an imagination of a future.⁹

Reforesting our imagination as an aesthetic means of restoring urbanity through the power of life is another way of expressing the more-than-human condition that enables us to move beyond the human-centric urban context. In the more-than-human realm, acknowledging the inherent limitations of knowledge is a default starting point. Such methods as collaborative engagements, thought projects, and incorporating nonhuman species into technology-enhanced experimental designs can be deployed to identify nonhuman species’ “ways of life.”¹⁰ However, we can “never fully comprehend the experience”¹¹ of nonhuman species, whether animals or plants. This limitation underscores the complexities of knowledge acquisition.

Furthermore, the urgency of climate change has exposed numerous challenges of developing timely understandings of the problems of climate change and environmental degradation. As planetary scientists such as Kai Kornhuber and Samuel Bartusek point out, “[m]ultiple recent record-shattering weather events raise questions about the adequacy of climate models to effectively predict and prepare for unprecedented climate impacts on human life, infrastructure, and ecosystems.”¹² Recent scientific research reveals that “extreme heat in several regions globally is increasing significantly and faster in magnitude than what state-of-the-art climate models have predicted under present warming even after accounting for their regional summer background warming.”¹³ Not only does this research show an urgent need to improve scientific and technological climate models to keep up with the pace of climate change, but it also suggests the need for reevaluating environmental knowledge.

What forms of knowledge or modes of cognition, encompassing the sciences, humanities, and the arts, are particularly pertinent to the investigation of the more-than-human realm? By posing this question, I exercise caution in presuming that the sciences alone possess the exclusive capacity to address questions pertaining to the more-than-human. Classic environmentalism, which is often empowered by environmental sciences to orient toward “palliatives within the current system reducing emissions or glyphosate use,” may not engage more fundamental systemic change to address the causes of environmental degradation.¹⁴ Similarly, classic environmental humanities, which examine environmental issues, do not necessarily address the urgency of speedy climate change and environmental degradation.

To inquire into the more-than-human condition is to engage the pressing global ecological and social catastrophes connected to climate change, environmental degradation, racism, sexism, and colonialism. I here focus on the

field of research-based art.¹⁵ For the critical theorist and artist Denise Ferreira da Silva, an “unavoidable task” in research-based contemporary art “is to consider the question of whether – and, if so, how – to respond to today’s pressing global (ecological and social) catastrophes.”¹⁶ Like other fields, however, contemporary art as a form of inquiry has limitations. Especially, artists and curators face the difficult task if they do not feel at home by taking up “the procedures of art criticism as usual,” for example, if they “approach art from an interest in, concern with, or even an investment in, undermining the colonial, racial, anthropocentric, cisheteropatriarchal matrix that sustain the capitalist political architecture.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, as the writer and curator Katheryn Weir argues, research-based art practices can generate “connections between ecosystems, communities and geographies,” as well as reorient us to learn from “the ways in which other value systems, bodies of knowledge and cosmologies ... confront colonial legacies and the effects of capitalism’s environmental degradation.”¹⁸

Research-based art work and creation serves as an effective mode of inquiry into the more-than-human realm of aesthetics. The scope of this aesthetics goes beyond our conventional understanding of it not only as a theoretical exploration of art but also as an allegedly distinct type of experience. As the philosopher Mark Johnson points out, aesthetics encompasses all the processes through which any aspect of our experience can be meaningful. In this expanded perspective, aesthetics encompasses both the ways “embodied social creatures” experience meanings and the ways of meaning-making emerged from the nature of bodies, the functioning of brains, social interactions with others, and the structures of environments with which we are constantly engaged in visceral interactions.¹⁹

In a general sense, “embodied social creatures” can refer to humans or nonhumans. However, in the context of a more-than-human habitat, they can encompass both humans and nonhumans who form a network of solidarity to address problems of the habitat as an infrastructure that binds humans to nonhumans. “Human organisms,” as Johnson argues, “inhabit their world most immediately through their perception of qualities, often at a level beneath conscious awareness. We are in and of the world via qualitative determinations, ‘before we know it,’ by which I mean, before we relate to it as knowers.”²⁰ It is at the level of this embodied meaning (rather than the intentional action of human-centric world-making) that the habitability of human organisms can be more-than-human if it emerges from a network or an assemblage of organ-generated, experience-based habitable qualities that include both humans and nonhuman entities.²¹

In research-based art practices where aesthetic investigation explores the elements that give meaning to experiences, we can identify various ways in which meaning emerges for humans and nonhuman entities. For instance, it can manifest through “images, action schemas, radially structured concepts, conceptual metaphors, metonymies, feelings, and emotions.”²² Research-based art work and creation can generate images and vocabularies through which questions are posed and alternatives are sought, facilitating and empowering “the imaginative and speculative processes” fundamental for constructing alternative values beyond those that have currently led the entire planet into “a spiral of toxicity and climate breakdown.”²³

The Library of More-Than-Humane is a research-based art practice that adopts a broad framework that transcends human-centric views rooted in European epistemological frameworks. Continental philosophers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Georges Bataille, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, and Hélène Cixous, have explicitly discussed animality as a means of reflecting on the human-animal relationship. While their perspectives and approaches vary, they often share

common themes, such as the boundaries and related identities associated with animality. Notably, many of these thinkers draw upon theological or religious perspectives, particularly Christianity, to frame their discussions.²⁴ The “more-than-humane” framework in the context of the Library of More-Than-Humane aims to encourage a more inclusive understanding of the relationship between humans and nonhuman entities, challenging the notion that humans are the sole arbiters of morality and ethics.²⁵

The ways in which the project of the Library of More-Than-Humane showcases image-based “books” emphasize connections between aesthetic investigation, visualization, and imagination. The project encourages creators or artists to deploy the “book” form of an assemblage of images as a method of approaching to the more-than-human. In the process of assembling images, investigation and visualization are inseparable from imagination. In her 2020 conversation entitled “El Robo” (Theft) with the artist Maria Thereza Alves, the theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva calls for a paradigm shift in thinking, asserting that artistic practice is uniquely suited to mediate due to its inherent focus on the imagination. She underscores the significance of images in facilitating thought and highlights the ability of artists to create images that render abstract, yet tangible, forms of violence and transformation.²⁶ Using assembled images to frame analysis and guide action, artists or creators can offer innovative perspectives on conceiving situations and bringing disparate things together. Consequently, images can become valuable for aesthetic investigation.

To further illustrate the use of images as an aesthetic approach, I would like to elaborate the concept of the assemblage of images through an explanation of the term *xiang* (象, “image”) in the Yijing or The Book of Change. *Xiang* (象, “image”) means the “comprehensive image” according to the philosopher Tingyang Zhao.²⁷ The Yijing contains a total of 64 *xiangs*, which are mathematical modalities that convey 64 distinct scenarios of the transformation of *wanwu* (萬物, “ten thousand things”). In the Yijing, the Dao refers to “the optimal among all possible ways of being”²⁸ in the more-than-human realm. Consequently, employing “comprehensive image” to translate the meaning of *xiang* establishes *xiang*’s indexical relationship to the Dao. As a comprehensive image, *xiang* neither represents the Dao nor constitutes a state of being itself. Instead, it embodies a comprehensive process. In other words, *xiang* as a comprehensive image refers to an assemblage of images, highlighting the multiplicity of *xiangs* conveyed in the Yijing. Notably, the character *xiang* itself is an image; it neither marks a distinction between the singular and the plural nor registers the singular-plural binary logic. This *xiang* expresses a fundamental characteristic of the assemblage of images, expressing an aesthetic rendering (or grasping) of the *shi* (勢, propensity or vitalism) of the “ten thousand things,” signifying the certainty of being incomplete, contingent, and open to change in the becoming of the ten thousand things. This assemblage of images as a comprehensive method cannot be scientific or epistemological. Rather, it serves as an aesthetic tool that makes the intelligent the optimal way of being in motion.

Finally, it should be noted that the assemblage of images can be more-than-human. As planetary crises of climate change and environmental degradation become more visible, such earthly events as oil spills, ice cores, plastiglomerates (plastic stones), and extreme weather patterns or heatwaves have produced autographic planetary diagrams²⁹ and sculptures. Instead of hiring human artists to conduct aesthetic investigation of sensing and sense-making,³⁰ the earth itself becomes a creator of an assemblage of images.³¹ These earthly events are nonhuman, but they are closely tied to the effects of human activities during sustained economic developments in various accelerated industrial revolutions and urbanization. If labor, work, and action, the three fundamental dimensions

of the human condition, are still measures of the meaning of the humankind today, they have already become entangled in an interdependent relationship between the human and the non-human in a habitat. The human condition is no longer human-centric but has become more-than-human.

December 10, 2024

Hai Ren is Professor of More-than-Asian Studies at the University of Arizona, and Bayu Scholar Distinguished Professor at Sichuan Fine Arts Institution in Chongqing. His interdisciplinary publications include studies of socially engaged art, research-oriented art, public history, new materialist anthropology, urban studies, comparative media and technology, popular culture, and critical theory. His recent work has appeared in *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, *Screen Bodies*, *The Art Newspaper China*, *Mediapolis*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Journal of Korean and Asian Arts*, *Societas/Communitas*, *China Review International*, and *Pacific Affairs*. This essay is part of a series published by the University of Arizona's Library of the More-Than-Humane.

Suggested reference style:

Ren, Hai. "Under the More-Than-Human Condition: How Does Research-Based Art Engage the Planetary Crises of Climate Change and Social Catastrophes?" *Annals of the Library of the More-Than-Humane*. The University of Arizona, Vol. 1, 2024. <https://more-than-humane.org>.

Notes

¹ One good example is the United Nations Climate Action Summit (WCAS), an event taking place during the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP) (<https://unfccc.int>).

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1959).

³ The UNESCO Creative Cities Network, "Creativity and Cities." Accessed November 30, 2024. <https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-cities/creativity-and-cities?hub=80094>.

⁴ The Global Goals, "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." Accessed November 30, 2024. <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/11-sustainable-cities-and-communities/>.

⁵ Kathryn Weir, "Rethinking Nature: Dialogues in Political Ecology between Artistic Research and Critical Thinking," in *Rethinking Nature*, edited by Kathryn Weir (Napoli, Italy: museo Madre, 2023), 15.

⁶ Hai Ren, "Planetary Art in the Sinophonecene: An Introduction," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, Vol. 8, Issue 2 (Fall 2022), 24.

⁷ Ailton Krenak, *Ancestral Future*, trans. Alex Brostoff and Jamille Pinheiro Dias (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2024), 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ Anna Tsing, "More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description," in *Anthropology and Nature*, edited by Kirsten Hastrup (London: Routledge, 2014), 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Kai Kornhuber, Samuel Bartusek, Richard Seager, Hans J. Schellnhuber, and Mingfang Ting, "Global Emergence of Regional Heatwave Hotspots Outpaces Climate Model Simulations," *Proceedings of the National*

Academy of Sciences (PNAS), Vol. 121, No. 49 (December 3, 2024), 1-10. Accessed December 5, 2024.
<<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2411258121>>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kathryn Weir, "Rethinking Nature," 15.

¹⁵ I use the term "research-based art" to highlight a kind of art creation or work that deploys research to address a question or issue, rather than solely for the purpose of creating an object for an exhibition. For a historical analysis of how research has become an important theme in art practices, see Michael Schwab, "Contemporary Research," HUB -- Journal of Research in Art, Design and Society, Issue 0 (Spring 2023). Accessed April 29, 2024.
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2190234/2190235>.

¹⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Rethinking Nature: A Reading of Its Proposition," in *Rethinking Nature*, edited by Kathryn Weir (Napoli, Italy: museo Madre, 2023), 32.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kathryn Weir, "Rethinking Nature," 23.

¹⁹ Mark Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought: The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 24-25.

²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹ See Anna Tsing ("More-than-Human Sociality") and Michael J. Hathaway [What a Mushroom Lives For: *Matsutake and the Worlds They Make* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022)] for their discussions of more-than-human sociality and more-than-human world-making.

²² Mark Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 15.

²³ Kathryn Weir, "Rethinking Nature," 23.

²⁴ Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton, "Editors' Introduction: The Animal Question in Continental Philosophy," in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, edited by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London: Continuum, 2004), xv-xxv.

²⁵ Jonathon Keats, "Toward the More-Than-Humane: Why People Need to Embrace the Values of Nature," *The Library of the More-Than-Humane*, the University of Arizona, October 2024. Accessed December 8, 2024.
<https://more-than-humane.org>.

²⁶ The conversation took place on August 25, 2020. The recorded video is available at
<https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/6683> or
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLQeWeQjb0U&t=181s>. Accessed December 9, 2024.

²⁷ Tingyang Zhao, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans Joseph E. Harroff. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021[2016]). 53.

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

²⁹ Lukáš Likavčan and Paul Heinicker, "Planetary Diagrams: Towards an Autographic Theory of Climate Emergency," in *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, edited by Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 227.

³⁰ Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics* (London: Verso, 2021), 33.

³¹ The earth is operative, and it is at this sense that the earth creates events.