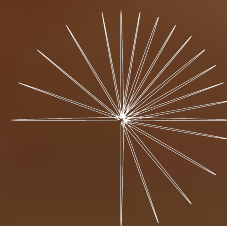


Where do we go now?

A manifesto on Humanism, The White Lotus, perception,
changing direction, and creative agency in this day and
age by Annemijn Rijk / Body of Art



Body of Art
Annemijn Rijk

Where are we going?

A manifesto on Humanism, The White Lotus, perception, changing direction, and artistry in this day and age.

I am Annemijn Rijk, a philosopher, choreographer, and 'echo-maker'. With my company, Body of Art, I create sensory, embodied theater experiences that take place in the bodies of performers, the audience, and the space itself. For a long time, my thoughts about the future have revolved around one question: Where are we going? In an "ever-faster accelerating society, characterized by aggression," as described by sociologist Hartmut Rosa, it's difficult to find my bearings. I want to take turns, but I go straight ahead. I want to take my time, be sustainable, be healthy, and contribute responsibly to the world around me, but I'm polluting. I'm going fast, and it feels like I have to go faster and faster, deliver, exhaust myself, push myself, be here and there simultaneously. Looking at the world around me, I observe that the way we, as humanity, in relation to our environment, occupy a place on earth driven by a desire for power, a desire to know, control, and dominate. We decide what something is, we decide who lives where and for how long, how much forest remains, which animals die and which don't. We decide where the water flows, what a centimeter is, and how quickly the world as we think we know it will be destroyed by our own actions. As if it were our own.

The excesses of optimistic Humanism

What I think I see when I look at the world around me is the legacy of optimistic humanism, which originated in the Italian Enlightenment. In an attempt to break free from the medieval Catholic stranglehold, Enlightenment thinkers around 1600 asked themselves the questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? In response to these questions, Humanism emerged, a movement that emphasizes the central role of humanity, focusing on its rational capacity. Humanity, the humanists argue, is a linguistic and rational being capable of achieving broad cultural, moral, economic, and artistic prosperity through its intellectual abilities. This is, in my opinion, a remarkably optimistic view of human potential. And, moreover, a project that has only been partially successful. Because as heirs of the Enlightenment, we are familiar with both the fruits of the scientific revolution, the progressive humanist ideals, and the optimistic faith in human reason, as well as its excesses: an industrialized society with a culture of planning, control, efficiency, predictability, exploitation, and alienation. Looking at the world around me, I therefore believe it's time to ask ourselves these questions again: Where do we come from? Who are we? And where are we going?

Where does all the pain go?

I believe the world we're moving towards is one filled with fear. Recently, I heard the following question in the TV series The White Lotus: *"Three billion animals died in the wildfires in Australia. Where does all the pain go?"* That question haunts and paralyzes me. If I let my intuition answer that question, I would arrive at all the people suffering from burnout, all the young people with suicidal thoughts, more so than ever in recent years, all the children who wake up at night with inexplicable panic attacks, and the existential loneliness I and so many others feel when, after watching yet another devastating flood on TV, we powerlessly surrender a shred of hope. In those moments when I shudder to wonder where all that pain is going, a small existential crisis often follows, in which the world's increasing unrest, without consent, nestles in my bloodstream: Where are we going? It's those moments when, as a creator and a human being, I ask myself what on

earth I still want to add with my theatre work to a world that already seems overcrowded with information, drama, materials, confrontations, and tensions. A quote that once gave me clarity during such a crisis comes from the British researcher and artist Anaib Jain. Jain, based on her research, dares to think experimentally about these phenomena which are so recognizable to me and many others. She wrote: *"When people out of nowhere wake up at night with an anxiety attack, what they're feeling is the anxiety of the trees in the Amazon burning down. What we experience when we feel an extreme loneliness that we can't explain is the loneliness of the last white rhino that can't express himself or communicate with others of his species."* As one of my performers once said after rehearsing a scene: *"Being here gives us the enormous responsibility to be a healthy cell within the whole."* I think she's right. Rosi Braidotti, founder of critical posthumanism, would also agree with this.

Critical Posthumanism

Critical posthumanism is a contemporary philosophical movement concerned with the question of what it means to be human, while incorporating critiques of both humanism and anti-humanism. And they do this out of *love* for humanity. Braidotti describes one of the domains within this critical posthumanism as forward-looking experiments with new forms of subjectivity. This means that philosophers, scientists, anthropologists, and artists working within this domain investigate experiences where the boundaries between human, machine, animal, and earth blur. Posthumanists, therefore, draw attention to moments when the boundaries between what is and is not human dissolve. This process, of course, already began in the 19th century, when, with the rise of the theory of evolution, it became clear that humans were not so much the crowning achievement of God's creation, but rather an animal among animals. What role do the arts play in rethinking and critically examining the question of what it means to be human? I will attempt to answer that question by making it personal. In the context of posthumanism, for me personally, the role of the arts in this world takes on a necessary place.

Calibrating Our Internal Compass

It's no coincidence that in *The White Lotus*, it was a 16-year-old, gaming-addicted boy, a member of a new generation, who, on vacation without his phone, in a rare moment of clarity, asked himself aloud: "Where does all the pain go?" Assuming (or accepting) that a phenomenon like the pain unleashed by 3 trillion animals burned in a forest fire isn't an isolated phenomenon, but a shared one that transcends the boundaries of our sophisticated "humanity," not only allows us to develop profound empathy but also allows us to take responsibility for seeking solutions beyond the realms of logic or efficiency. It forces us to ask: What else can humanity be, besides that rational being? For me, exploring that question is the urgency of my creative work in this time, and in this world. I believe that art can calibrate our internal compass. Art can make visible what has always been present within us, yet hidden or invisible. Make it tangible. In this way, art can bring to the surface the "non-rational"—call it sensations, emotions, ideas, intuitions, or insights hidden beneath the paralyzing veil of the status quo. That is what I want and must do with my creative work. Making the invisible visible. Not by creating it, but by revealing it. Giving people back what they have lost due to the way the world is organized. I'm not talking about speaking the truth here, but about exposing how our world is constructed, based on a logic befitting a particular political and philosophical order. Thus, for me, art carries within it a certain hope that challenges the state of the world. With every creation we make, we can contribute to exploring and expressing our hope for a world and a humanity yet to come. This creates autonomy, hope, a horizon, and agency. It allows us to chart our own course and understand our place within the collective and the larger ecosystem. The ecosystem we don't create, but rather are a part of. It creates us.

Space for Embodied Perception

So, while it's still the norm to relate to the world in a way where reason prevails, and where this reason distinguishes people from others (animals, plants, stones, but also: children, women, strangers), I feel that my work must create space for embodied perception, where our embodied consciousness is seen not as distinct, but rather as shared and connected to the world around us. Posthuman experiments, insights, and wake-up calls like those of Jain and in *The White Lotus* reinforce me in this like never before. They confirm my idea that we as artists must make a difference, and that theater can indeed do so. They motivate me to activate audiences through my work, to break out of paralyzing passivity, and to connect with them. My task is not to convince, but to initiate something in others. I don't want to pretend that I can make a significant contribution to the major themes I'm now raising. I'm all too aware of my limited position. These major themes form the context within which I, as a human being and creator, relate to the world and the future, and I feel driven to do everything within my circle of influence and with the resources that I have to put into practice what I can do. So, if we embrace the idea that our current culture demands research and openness about what a sustainable continuation of our current rational paradigm might be, then we will have to create work, hold conversations, and organize debates that actively contribute to breaking through our current way of thinking and being.

Breaking Free from the Current Direction

Perhaps it is now up to me and my fellow makers and researchers to use the body, embodied perception, and the knowledge it generates to set benchmarks for a new view of humanity. I just don't think we're there yet. Because if the world we're moving towards, or the world we currently find ourselves in, is one we can't tolerate, then that means, first and foremost, that we must break free from the current direction. I don't want to offer a comprehensive suggestion of how to do that, because everyone can and will find their own interpretation. I do know that my proposal for moving forward sustainably, both collectively and with the world around us, is not an easy one; it requires that we first get radically lost.

What if we completely lose direction, become disoriented, take unknown turns, and dive deep? In the dance studio, in conversations, at the office, on stage, in the foyer, on the way home. What if we lose our grip on our environment to such an extent that our environment, with all its ingrained cultural patterns and frameworks, can no longer keep its grip on us? From this state of wandering, we could then, both within and outside the safe context of the theater, collectively explore new paradigms, beyond what is logical, what we already know, what is visible, or how we have learned to do things. My hope is that these kinds of artistic experiments, which challenge us to completely let go of our grip on the world, will enable us to have more extensive conversations in and about the future, thereby also giving a voice to the "non-human" that we have silenced for years.

Finally, I believe that as artists, we must continue to fight against those parts of ourselves that are tempted to play the game of the world as it is, and we must continue to create to make our own lives and the lives of others as livable as possible. That fight is not only necessary, but also irresistible, because that is where life is.