

Exhibition essay for *The whole is less than the sum of its parts* at She Will

Artists: Sverre Gullesen, Carl Mannov, Anna Daniell, Madeleine Noraas and Karl Eivind Jørgensen.

## UNBROKEN RETURN

By Ingrid Halland

### I. The Whole is

Paralytic  
architectures  
stranded districts  
rotting municipal gardens  
deserted lots  
mounds of saltpeter  
camps of urban nomads  
cans shingles plastic sanitary napkins

[...]

languages in pieces

The signs were broken

*Atl tlachinolli*  
was spilt  
burnt water

There is no center

[...]

All

is gain

if all is lost

I walk towards myself

toward the plaza

the space within

it is not a *subverted paradise*,

it is a pulsebeat of time

places are confluences

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flutters of beings in an instantaneous space

The wind whistles in the ash trees

fountains

almost liquid light and shadow

voices of water

shine flow are lost

a bundle of reflections

left in my hands

I walk without moving forward

We never arrive

Never reach where we are

Not the past

The present is untouchable<sup>1</sup>

Excerpts from Octavio Paz's poem "Vuelta" written in 1972.

In the poem "Vuelta," Octavio Paz (1914–1998) dwells on the status of nature in the new landscape of the late-capitalist city. Here Paz explores aspects of Aztec mythology, where epistemological classifications are different from the ones operating in the modern West. There were voices in the water, no progress in walking, he says. Language and signs were in pieces and broken. No center existed and the city was abandoned. Instead there were deserted lots and camps of urban nomads. "Atl tlachinolli" refers to the name of an Aztec symbol showing two intertwined rivers. The symbol has been interpreted to mean "burnt village" or "water and scorched earth."<sup>2</sup> In the poem, the land was burned and the Aztec village—with rivers and winds in the ash trees—was lost. Rotting gardens, stranded districts. "We never arrive/ Never reach where we are," Paz writes in the poem's final lines, and indicates a notion of endless openness. Yet if we walk without moving forward, and never arrive, where are we?

Paz' poem shows us an emerging new nature, a nature in catastrophe, but not only that, the poem also shows an indigenous ontology in catastrophe. Western late-capitalist forces destroyed Aztec villages and killed off Aztec mythology. In a reading of the poem in 1972, Paz revealed that the inspiration for "Vuelta" was the founding myth of Mexico City. He said: "In their wanderings near the lake of Mexico, the Aztecs saw a bundle floating in the waters. They fished it out and found two good sticks to make fire. The meaning was *atl tlachinolli*: the marriage of water and fire. This metaphor was the founding stone of Mexico City. Now, they have sealed with

1 Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957-1987*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1991), 362-70.

2 Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 106.

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concrete and plastic the old prophetic mouth where water and fire spoke.”<sup>3</sup> In “Vuelta,” Paz proclaims that industrialization will lead to an inevitable catastrophe.

The original title of the poem is “Vuelta,” which is translated into “Return.” In this translation, however, something is lost. *Vuelta* means both the act of returning but also to turn. Moreover, it refers to the reverse side, that is, the back or another side. The poem decomposes the rigid structure of lines as it flows over the pages without any punctuation. In this sense, its form is open-ended. Further, the form of the poem displays what it speaks of, like *vuelta* it keeps turning and returning trying to reach another side. The poem reveals a sense of unclosed restlessness.

## II. Less Than

In his book *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics* from 2008, David Wills discusses the relation between humans and the technological. Wills shows how humans are not distinct from technology and that technology does not serve as a passive resource available for humans to utilize. Wills argues that the animal, or specifically the human body, should be understood as an articulation of both the natural and the artificial. Our conception of the human as an intact natural entity that subsequently comes into contact with inanimate forms of technology does not account for the ways we in fact operate in the world.

Wills argue for a symbiotic account of the human-technology relationship, which cannot be reduced to a strictly instrumental one. Technology is not a raw material: it is not merely a resource available for humans to exploit. Wills argue that by being human we always turn towards technology, we turn because it is hidden “behind” us, and by the fact that it is hidden—or withdrawn—we cannot see it and we assume that it is something we must look for somewhere else. In Wills’ words: “The human is [...] understood to become technological as soon as it becomes human, to be always already turning that way.”<sup>4</sup> Will’s scholarship belongs to the growing body of research of the so-called ‘posthumanism’. In short, posthumanism aims to destabilize human beings as the ultimate power in the world and the movement understands other entities—for instance technology—as intertwined with human beings so we expand into *more-than-human-beings*.

## III. The Sum of its Parts

“Like a mannerist painting that stretches the rules of classicism to a breaking point, global warming has stretched our world to the breaking point.”<sup>5</sup> Timothy Morton claims that the new geological era of the Anthropocene has brought a radical breaking point into the present. What kind of breaking point is this? Morton claims that global

<sup>3</sup> Octavio Paz transcribed in Emilio Ambasz, ed. *The Universitas Project: Solutions for a Post-Technological Society* (New York: Museum Of Modern Art, 2006), 302.

<sup>4</sup> David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics*, vol. 5, Posthumanities (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Posthumanities (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 108.

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warming has brought the ontological status of three entities into a breaking point: nature, technology, and human beings—which is an argument in correlation to Will’s argument on the entanglement between technology and human beings.

If one follows Morton and Wills’s posthumanist thinking, our time is permeated by the entanglement between man, nature, and technology. In this philosophical landscape, humans, animals, art, inorganic matter, and technology are on an equal ontological footing, hence, they are granted the same ontological status. This *ontological flatness* implies a dehierarchization of being, such that humans do not have any exceptional status.

*I walk without moving forward.* In the new geological landscape of the Anthropocene, Paz’ notion of a late-capitalist city seems to extend into a global continuum. *The whole is less than the sum of its parts*, states Morton. In the new philosophical landscape of the Anthropocene, the parts have extended the borders of the old whole and into a new.

## Literature

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