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Residual Aesthetics: Rethinking Zoran Todorović's Warmth Against the Benchmark of the Anthropocene

Abstract: This paper examines Zoran Todorović's *Warmth*, an artwork composed of cut and discarded human hair, exploring its aesthetic, political, and social implications through the lens of marginal aesthetics, abjection, biopolitics, and posthuman theory. Drawing on thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Rosi Braidotti, and Judith Butler, the analysis situates hair as abject, waste, form of life, and un-grievable within broader contexts of cognitive labour and the ecological crisis. The paper aims to argue the agency of discarded hair as a material, instrument, and method in contemporary art to disrupt the anthropocentric discourse by decentering the human along the lines of Braidotti's theory of posthuman subjectivity.

Keywords: Zoran Todorović; posthuman; hair-based art; waste; abject; ungrievability; Anthropocene.

1.

In 2009, Zoran Todorović was selected as one of the two artists to exhibit at the Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, alongside Katarina Zdjelar. He presented *Warmth*, which formally takes on a minimalist guise, consisting of layering multiple square pieces of felted fabric made out of trimmed, discarded human hair on standardized factory pallets.¹ The installation also included, rather than being accompanied by, a video projection, documenting, and thus emphasizing, the *making-of* process, including cutting, gathering, storing, transporting, and industrially processing the hair into murky grey blankets/fabrics.² Anchored in contemplating the body, and its parts and residue, as subjects of normative control, social care, and surveillance, Todorović's *Warmth* has, naturally, been interpreted and analyzed thus far through the lens of biopolitics, foregrounding hair not so much as waste but rather as a potent

¹ Zoran Todorović, "Warmth," *Zoran Todorović*, accessed May 31, 2025, https://www.zorantodorovic.com/portfolio_page/warmth/, Zoran Todorović, *Zoran Todorović: Warmth = Toplina: [The Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, June 6 – November 22, 2009]* (Museum of Contemporary Art = Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2009). The exhibition catalog features key essays, referred to in this text, by Branislav Dimitrijević, "Warmth/ But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?"; Stevan Vuković, "Art in the Field of Bioeconomics"; and Jasmina Čubrilo, "Documents on Experiments in Biopolitics," 9, 40.

² The video documentation that accompanied *Warmth* is available on the following link: Zoran Todorović, *Warmth*, video, 2:10 min, Vimeo, uploaded August 24, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/181954128>.

carrier of genetic material, a condensed collection of the DNA of a part of the adult Serbian population, and a manifestation of how life – and its by-products – are subject to control by the state and its entities.³ Here, two points need to be made. First, that the hair used in the installation was gathered over a period of several months of rigorous planning from hair salons, as places of volitional hair-cutting, and sites that epitomize state control and rule, such as prisons and military barracks.⁴ Second, that *Warmth* operates as an amalgam of the installation, the process that preceded it, and the video material that documents its creation/production, i.e., the hair-based fabrics represent the result of a complex production process. This inscribes an open-ended structure to the work entwined with its consumption, perception, and affect, transforming the work from a seeming installation to an event, a singularity that is referentially linked to the document.⁵ This paper aims to extend the analysis of *Warmth* toward considering the use of discarded hair as an abject, waste material against the benchmark of the Anthropocene, and its subsequent dilemmas, the posthuman crisis and ecological discourse. By arguing that the work employs and harnesses a residual aesthetic, this text contextualizes the work as a posthuman reflection on what forms of matter, labour, and life are deemed visible, valuable, or grievable.

2.

Unraveling humanism as a historical construct that centred the “Man” as a universalistic ideal, Rosi Braidotti defined posthumanism as “the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework.”⁶ Echoing Foucault’s “Death of Man”, the author put forth the outline for a posthuman subjectivity, explaining that it “is not about the death of the subject, but about the proliferation of multiple subjects in a process.”⁷ This includes overcoming the narrow notion of what counts as the *human*, i.e., abandoning the predominant binary logic that rests on differences.⁸ Braidotti recognizes the “crisis of the subject” as a symptom of global challenges, such as the permeation of technology into every pore of life, the precarity of contemporary war, and the ecological crisis.⁹ These aspects are not the only circumstances that propel the crisis, but they do emerge as pivotal in contemplating life, as well as its governance and commodification. In

³ Dimitrijević, “Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What will Be Left to Me?” 9.

⁴ Dimitrijević, “Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?” 9. Jasmina Čubrilo, “Documents on Experiments in Biopolitics,” 40.

⁵ Dimitrijević, “Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?” 7; Miško Šuvaković, “Unavoidable Antagonisms or Three Biopolitics: Biopolitical Modalities in the Artistic Productions of Zoran Todorović,” in *Ogled*, Winter 2022, edited by Anica Tucakov, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://www.zorantodorovic.com/text/>

⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity, 2013), 37.

⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 50.

⁸ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 15–16.

⁹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 9.

terms of labour, the information age and the rapid development of digital technology instigated a crucial shift, ushering in “semiocapitalism”, defined by Franco “Bifo” Berardi as an entity that treats information as a commodity, a new type of cognitive labour marked by affective engagement, fragmentation, and abstraction.¹⁰ Technology-driven economies, dispersed across fields of stem cell research, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, etc., push forward the agenda of “universal progress” at the expense of blurring the boundaries of ethics by simply not addressing these issues or dealing with them too late. This development indicates a critical leap from Foucault’s biopolitics, as a systemic effort to regulate, subjugate, and control the (social) body, to Mbembe’s formulation of necro-politics subsumed in “sovereignty as the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not.”¹¹ In other words, if biopolitics implies the power to rule over life, necro-politics suggests the power to rule over death, i.e., it implies governance over the question of what constitutes as *life* and whether its *materiality* is expendable or not. In that vein, introducing the concept of “grievability”, Judith Butler begins by delineating several key concepts. First, she makes the distinction between “recognizing” and “apprehending” life, explaining the soft nuance that apprehending life does not imply its recognition as a (grievable, i.e., politically and socially visible) life, which is a process that takes existing social frames as a prerequisite.¹²

However, the human returns like an entity of utmost authority and power over the terrestrial domain in the Anthropocene thesis, centering the (hu)man and his/its activities as the predominant factor in the extensive and geologically significant transformations of the planet. While alarmingly calling for a certain sense of awareness, accountability, and recognition of non-human life, the thesis, as T. J. Demos lucidly points out, anaesthetizes its potency by reinforcing “the techno-utopian position that ‘we’ have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging – and in fact the two, the dual colonization of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined.”¹³ Demos’ collective “we” echoes the arguments by Claire Colebrook, who foregrounded the issue of conflating *all* humans into one undistinguishable pile by essentially formulating “a new form of difference” between the *Homo sapiens* and other life forms and forms of life.¹⁴ To follow the line of argument set out by Mbembe and Butler, the Anthropocene discourse positions *humanity* as the sovereign entity that is paradoxically and simultaneously responsible for the devastating ecological transformations that threaten its existence, which, as a prerogative, must be preserved, i.e., the only *life* that is grievable. The precariousness of such a position is made disturbingly

¹⁰ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Semiotext(e), 2009), 73–89.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 135–45; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019), 53.

¹² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 1–34.

¹³ T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017), 28.

¹⁴ Claire Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene,” in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 7.

visible as the most recent effect of the ecological crisis unfolded before our eyes, when an entire village of Blatten in the Swiss Alps was engulfed under ice and rock after a glacier catastrophically collapsed.¹⁵ Considering that an evacuation was organized, this ecological incident underlines how humanity acts for humanity's sake, with the devastated valley serving as an ungrievable reminder.

In terms of contemporary art, two questions arise as significant – what *sort* of art can navigate, contemplate, and articulate the complexities of the post-human crisis outlined here briefly, and how is such art perceived and received? To answer this question, we must return to Braidotti's concept of the posthuman subjectivity that is “rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere, as both materialist and relational, ‘nature-cultural’ and self-organizing, and as such, crucial to this process.”¹⁶ According to Braidotti, “this new knowing subject is a complex assemblage of human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured.”¹⁷ In other words, art that correlates to the new posthuman subject emerges in the interstice; it explores the breadth of the in-betweenness to generate meaning as a complex singularity.

3.

The in-between is central to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as the epitome of what provokes it, as she writes: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.”¹⁸ The abject exists in the interstice/as an interstice, as a phenomenon that escapes and subverts binary logic. In that line of thought, hair – particularly trimmed, discarded human hair – emerges as a manifestation of the abject, a simultaneous *self* and *other*, but neither entirely *self* nor *other*, a carrier of life (DNA) and a *lifeless* form, but not *life* itself. Discarded hair is a life's trace, a code, and a vessel of memory. On the other hand, trimmed hair is waste, it is residue, and, as Mary Douglas put it in her seminal study *Purity and Danger*, it is “matter out of place.”¹⁹ The Cambridge Dictionary defines hair as “the mass of thin threadlike structures on the head of a person or any of these structures that grow out of the skin of a person or animal.”²⁰ From a biological standpoint, hair is a complex structure composed of proteins, water, lipids, minerals, and pigments. Culturally and historically, hair has been a core element of identity, a symbol of status and beauty, and a highly sought-after commodity. Yet, when trimmed, hair becomes devoid of its

¹⁵ Tess McClure, “This is ground zero for Blatten: the tiny Swiss village engulfed by a mountain,” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/01/this-is-ground-zero-for-blatten-the-tiny-swiss-village-engulfed-by-a-mountain>.

¹⁶ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 51–52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

¹⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 2002), 36–40.

²⁰ “Hair,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hair>.

personal and social function, transforming into waste to be disposed of, despite carrying genetic material. In essence, cut hair becomes an excess, a surplus, it becomes abject by activating the boundaries between self and non-self. As a residue of human life and existence, discarded hair represents the antithesis of the “ideal Vitruvian Man”, a threat that demasks its fictionality, and thus a suitable *matter* to illuminate and expose the multifaceted crisis of the posthuman.

If we follow the line of thought presented by Nicolas Bourriaud, expunged hair belongs to the domain of the *exform* – “the site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted, products and waste. Exform designates a point of contact, a ‘socket’ or ‘plug’, in the process of exclusion and inclusion – a sign that switches between center and periphery, floating between dissidence and power.”²¹ According to the French theorist, contemporary art exhibits an explicit anti-idealism, adopting what the regimes of art deem insignificant, ugly, uncanny, abstract, uncomfortable [...] to alter its modes of (in)visibility. Put differently, contemporary art harnesses the ungrievable by methods and processes that might grant it recognition through apprehension. Discarded hair, thus, might be considered an ungrievable matter, a lifeless vessel of genetic material that has been marked as superfluous. Due to its abject nature, discarded human hair in contemporary art is far from common; it is rather marginal as a material, constituting a particular niche within practices that are predominantly textile-related. However, when considered in the context of the ecological crisis brought about by the anthropos, this specific bodily detritus seems to induce a peculiar “closed circle” when employed in art. Compared to synthetic materials, foremostly plastic, as “the substrata of advanced capitalism,” and the hallmark of humanity’s environmental footprint, hair-as-waste-as-material represents a more ecological solution, albeit raising ethical and biological issues in textile production.

4.

As introduced in the opening chapter, Zoran Todorović assembled the stockpiles of discarded hair, industrially processed into identically sized felted blankets, as an installation consisting of minutely layering the materials one on top of the other, akin to a factory storage setting. Exhibited at the Serbian pavilion, *Warmth* mimicked, or rather, subverted the minimalist formula with an ambiguous display of several identical textile-laden pallets, whose production was exposed through the video documentation, making the invisible labour one of its points of interest. The hair as raw material was collected over several months from approximately 240,000 people in an arduous process that brought together and engaged a large number of individuals, establishments, and organizations. In its ideal form, the installation would have been composed out of the hair of every adult Serbian citizen, transforming it into a composite genetic map.²² Although the artist’s intention would more firmly iterate issues

²¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. Erik Butler (Verso, 2016), x.

²² Dimitrijević, “Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left To Me?” 9.

of how identity, nationality, and representation intertwine and correlate, the felt installation still embodies the social and the personal body within each hair strand. Alongside its reference to governing one's body (or body remnants, in this case), the work tackles the issue of biopolitics more explicitly in terms of gathering hair from people who were in hospitals, prisons, and military barracks at the time, confronting the genealogy of the institution as a sovereign body.

As Kristeva underlines, the abject has no object, and, in the case of Todorović, he neither perverts nor purifies the abject, instead simply and neutrally materializing it, and in doing so, engages the meanings discarded hair can generate with its ex-formal, waste-based, organic, and lifeless, abject nature. On the other hand, if the raw substance is in itself “matter out of place,” then *Warmth* becomes “form out of place,” or, in other words, abjecting the abject. This is further emphasized by assigning a function to the hair-textiles, implying that the raw material, waste, has been through a recycling process that has reassigned its value in social frameworks. As waste, abject residue, the hair represents the excess of the human, debris, a surplus, entering the domain of ungrievability, a meaningless loss and a paradoxical congruence of *living* and decay, a relational matter marked by a distinct vital materiality.²³

Here, we must digress to emphasize that *Warmth* is not an isolated incident in Todorović's oeuvre, considering the abject features throughout his works. As Miško Šuvaković aptly put it, Todorović engages in a dual apprehension of “new media,” viewing them as both “devices in art” and “products of mass social technologies, such as hypnosis, medicine, plastic surgery byproducts, etc.”²⁴ Namely, Todorović meticulously exhumes the abject to probe and create layers of societal disturbances, aiming to expose them. The elegance of his approach in employing the abject becomes particularly evident in artworks like *Agalma* (2003), which involved making soap from the surgically removed body fat of the artist, hosting a public bath, and selling the soap in a flash sale. In *Assimilation* (realized between 1997 and 2010), the artist presented food made from human flesh, confronting social taboos, health concerns, and cultural nuances. In *Integration* (2017–), Todorović brewed beer from the urine collected from refugees in a Belgrade-based center, exposing the imposed paradigm of both object and waste embedded within the refugee status.²⁵ Considering this, *Warmth* emerges as a continuation of engagement with and within the liminality of materiality.

The video documentation represents an integral part of the installation, not only as a means of mediating the production process, illuminating the (ungrievable) labour of nearly 500 people, but also as a way of traversing the minimalist code toward an open-ended structure of the work. While the organization of the work rests

²³ Joshua Reno, “Waste and Waste Management,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 566.

²⁴ Zoran Todorović, Miško Šuvaković, Z.T. *Intenzitet afekta: performansi, akcije, instalacije – retrospektiva Zorana Todorovića / Z.T. Intensity of Affect: Performances, Actions, Installations – retrospective of Zoran Todorović*, Novi Sad: Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, 2009, 9.

²⁵ Sonja Jankov, “Savremene umetničke prakse kao vid interkulturalne komunikacije sa izbeglicama sa drugih kontinenata,” *Interkulturalnost: časopis za podsticanje i afirmaciju interkulturalne komunikacije* 18 (2019), 26–27.

on manpower and networks, the production is entirely industrial, which at this point particularly comes to the fore – not as a way of negating the manual but as a way of highlighting the transformation in the labour process. As Berardi highlighted the historic shift toward cognitive labour, the work interwoven within the production process of *Warmth* counteracts with an era ruled by the digital and the informational, by fostering a participatory, community-generating occurrence as a singular event and a manifestation of the artwork's pre-production affectation. As the artist states, *Warmth* is not a result, a finished product, but rather “a result of art that can be comprehended as a form of life and existence.” He continues:

This simultaneously means that the work is open to intervention and that its product is, in a certain way, made counting on the participation of a large number of people, so the consumption, perception and affectation of the work are largely part of the production itself and it is difficult to observe them separately. In this way, this installation, as well as the process of its realization, is actually an intervention space, a space of politicization of art and, in the context of this exhibition, a space of thematization of the state as a biopolitical agent.²⁶

Todorović's oeuvre is anchored in affectation, as reapplied and perhaps most tangibly manifested in *Warmth*. In Braidotti's terms, this implies “the outward-bound interconnections or relations they enable and sustain.”²⁷ In the context of *Warmth*, the installation, or rather the material, has not only become part of many museum collections but also began its own journey. Namely, it drew the attention of fashion designer Aleksandra Lalić, who designed a collection of dresses out of the abject material, and provoked a “reaction piece” by London-based Alix Bizet. On the other hand, Todorović's *Warmth* was the subject of institutional marginalization in 2020, when the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art displaced the work from its original spot, as part of an ongoing exhibition entitled *Reflections of Our Time*, for the purpose of an unauthorized building adaptation.²⁸ Although it might not be related to the specificities of the work in question, this bizarre incident does manifest itself as a demonstration of how art can be swiftly labelled as insignificant and a surplus within the institutional framework assigned to preserve and present it. In essence, it could be said that *Warmth* was proclaimed as ungrievable, leading us to recall Jacques Rancière's redistribution of the sensible to underline how this work re-exposes the regime of aesthetics that renders (in)visibility both within itself and through the affectations it independently generates.²⁹

²⁶ Zoran Todorović, “Stejtment umetnika,” *Umetnost: Blog o umetnosti*, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://umetnost.wordpress.com/stejtment-umetnika/>.

²⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 165.

²⁸ “Umetnik čije je delo sklonjeno: Todorović – Kiš brka pojmove,” *Nova.rs*, September 10, 2021, <https://nova.rs/kultura/umetnik-cije-je-delo-sklonjeno-todorovic-kis-brka-pojmove/>.

²⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 12–19.

Finally, let us return to the dichotomy intrinsic to discarded hair, as both living and dead, as a viable genome sample and an ungrievable, decaying, redundant matter, and how *Warmth* precisely operates within the threshold of such material. On the verge between bio-material and bio-waste, Zoran Todorović's work exposes the pivotal convergence of biopolitics and necropolitics. If we consider the decaying, trimmed hair as a posthuman form of life, as traces of existence and vessels of memory – along the lines of Braidotti's argument – we could connect *Warmth* to Mbembe's theory in more ways than one, starting from his repositioning of death “as the very principle of *excess* – an anti-economy.”³⁰ Mbembe draws on the history of slavery to argue for a form of death-in-life and, building on that, we could interpret the discarded hair in this work, processed and layered, exhibited and functional, as a manifestation of *life-in-death*. *Warmth*, thus, operates as a certain *death-world* of the (social) body, a demonstration of necro power and a reminder of social modes of existence marked by slow processes of erasure.³¹

5.

By considering Zoran Todorović's work *Warmth* against the grain of the Anthropocene, instead of singular analysis along the lines of the pre-set framework of biopolitics, the paper examines the artwork and its use of discarded hair as a raw resource to engage a residual aesthetic. Aimed at disrupting the aesthetic regime, the aesthetic in question employs the residual, the cast away, the discarded, the discharged, accepting and harnessing its abject nature to expose the injustices of a political, social, and aesthetic system that governs over the power of (in)visibility, sayability, and grievability. The following chapters introduce the lenses of the posthuman crisis, the ecological catastrophe, and the cognitive labour shift to deepen the understanding of how *the art of the residual* can illuminate the precariousness of the living condition. Contemplating concepts of materiality, decay, and waste, the paper foregrounds discarded hair as a material in art that can expand the narrative of the *human* in relation to life and forms-of-life, interconnecting humanity's role as producers of waste and redistributors of waste. Finally, the paper opens the complex question of the margins of/in art through the perspective of Todorović's *Warmth* as a case study, or rather as a template that has been marginalized directly and that embodies a margin, not in terms of residue-as-material, but in connection with the looming future of immaculate algorithms, smarter-than-human AI, and the posthuman debate. Both abjection and aesthetic, life and death, art and life intertwine within this work, that emerges as a champion of residual aesthetic as a form of resistance suitable to the challenges of the posthuman subject. In conclusion, by employing hair as bio-waste, Zoran Todorović's work renegotiates the power dynamics within the art system that, in turn, extends abjection and ungrievability from the realm of the material to the framework of the artwork itself to reaffirm its affective potential.

³⁰ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 69.

³¹ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40.

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