

RELATIONS, TRANSLATION AND CO-ACTIVITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH NICOLAS BOURRIAUD

KHÖREIN: Your concept of relational aesthetics opened the question of how an artwork constitutes relations between people. Today, you describe contemporary artistic practices as an extension of relational aesthetics toward interactions that extend beyond the human into technical, biological, and material forms of agency. If, as you have said, relational aesthetics of the '90s would be impossible to write today, what theoretical tools would you use now to describe artistic practices of interaction? At what point does relation cease to be a social category and become an ontological one?

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD: First, the relational is certainly the ground of my ontology. It connects to a philosophical family founded by Heraclitus, for whom the world is a flux, a stream. Relational aesthetics was the first step of an attempt to prioritize the dynamic over the static. The relational form is dialogic, it is the in-between of the artist and the beholder, of a producer and a consumer. Then, the *Radicant* describes forms as wandering, as circuits and trajectories. Thirdly, in *Inclusions*, I insist on another kind of movement, the one that displaces the borders between matter and form. That is why I tend to use the word “formation” instead of “form.” My texts are anti-Platonic, anti-Hegelian. According to Hegel, reality is ontologically rational, as the history of humankind is equivalent to the development of the “spirit”—in other words, a total victory over nature, and a total denial of the chaotic and fluctuating nature of reality. For me, the flux of relations is what the material reality is made of. Here, I agree with Karl Marx who defined “human nature” as the sum of human actions: reality (and sociality) is an ongoing construction. It is nothing more than the temporary result of human behavior. The world is not a solo show where human beings would be the only actors. It is a group show, and we don't know how it will evolve.

The theoretical extension of relational aesthetics to non-humans, which I started in 2013, was fed by an in-depth study of anthropology. Claude

Lévi-Strauss, already in 1962, wrote that the opposition between nature and culture is not objective, but a human construction. And more recently, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes European culture as a place where people “seem to live in a world where other living creatures are only part of the environment.” I also took into account the works of the physicist Karen Barad, who draws on the principles of quantum physics to argue that there are no isolated objects in the universe, because everything that exists emerges from a relationship. Nothing is a simple “thing,” and all interactions are “intra-actions” within the unity of matter. So, why are relations ontological for me? Because they are the main constituents of reality. All around me, I only see relations. And of course, before relational aesthetics, art has always been based on relationships: an artist produces an object from his or her own vision, and this vision modifies ours. What happened in the 1990s is that a bunch of artists started to place those social interactions at the center of their practice, to focus on the social state of the artwork. But today, those interactional practices have changed status: they are becoming tools of resistance against the automation of society, against all automatic alterities we are offered. Artificial intelligence is a machine pretending to be your friend, and human encounters are processed by Tinder or thousands of other applications. We need to fight against those products.

KH: If relations are the very substance of reality, as you suggest, how do we account for asymmetry within relational fields? How can we still think conflict, domination or inequality without reducing them to mere variations within a shared continuum?

NB: A continuum can hardly be homogeneous, the same way time is not purely linear. It is precisely because relations are the substance of reality that conflicts, domination, and inequality exist. In a world constituted of pure autonomous *monads*, to quote Leibniz, relations would not exist, and we would live in parallel channels, without friction. To suppress conflicts or attenuate inequality, the only way is to set another kind of relations, establish rules, frames, make laws. Domination is inscribed in any animal milieu. Imagine a symmetrical reality, where relations would not be prevailing: then, the organization of individuals could be mathematical. And actually, that is the goal of the ruling techno-power: naturalizing social relations through algorithms, installing a real symmetrical order, under the supervision of AI, that would “naturalize” the division between

the dominant class and the mob. For the time being, social relations are still asymmetrical, and it is not a bad thing in itself. I mean, they have no specified contents nor regulated intensities: politics start when we organize them, by establishing systems that give them a content, that position them within a collective. I am in favor of accidents, within a regulated frame.

KH: Across your work, modernity appears less as a stylistic period than an energetic and economic regime (one organized around acceleration, expenditure, and the abstraction of value) whose exhaustion has left us with fragmented narratives and a shared technical ground rather than a shared political horizon. Against both modernist universalism and post-modern relativism, you propose translation, post-production and the notion of the radican as ways of producing meaning without fixed origins. How does this shift reframe the very task of critique today?

NB: In 1859, the first oil gusher was built near Titusville, Pennsylvania. The Modern era was ruled by the cult of fast combustion, the adoration of explosion, which is a quick liberation of enormous quantities of energy. This is the way I understand the expression “less is more:” small device, huge explosion of meaning. Modernism is determined by this superabundance of energy. If modernism was a cultural sequence based on spilling, one could also say that colonialism was a by-product of the steam engine. For me, the post-modern era starts with the oil crisis, in 1973, and extends until the subprime crisis, in 2008. Why? Because 1973 was the end of this abundancy, the moment humanity foresaw the limits—as stated in *The Limits to Growth*, a document which was made public in 1972. And twenty-five years later, the subprime crisis showed how the world economy had reached the limits of its disconnection with physical reality. 1973–2008: during this postmodern period, radicalized by 1990s economic globalization, identity became the new aesthetic value. In a floating world, roots are valorized, they are the steady elements. Today, identity politics is a concept upon which both radical leftists and alt-right or neo-fascists agree. This common interest is enough, in my view, to be suspicious about any cultural essentialism. In 2010, *The Radicant* attempted to cast doubt on this post-modern fetish: the botanical term “radicant” describes plants that grow their roots while advancing, not depending on an original unique root. In other words, my identity is dynamic, it has yet to happen, it depends on the territories I pass by. This theory might actually have something to do with curating. In our teenage

years, we use culture, especially music, to differentiate ourselves: we wear badges, we build our ego through artists or bands. A curator is someone who never gives up on those dynamics, because he or she lives through the works of others, and builds his/her identity through successive artistic experiences. You mention translation and post-production, which are two practices based on recycling or processing things that already exist. It is ontologically linked to critique, it is all about interpretation. A word that comes from the Latin word “explain.”

KH: You engage the term Capitalocene rather than Anthropocene as the key framework of our time. How does this shift affect the ethical and political responsibility of artists—can art still articulate resistance, or only modulate visibility, circulation, and value within those circuits?

NB: The term “Capitalocene” was invented by Andreas Malm, and it seems more appropriate than “Anthropocene,” because climate change is due to a political system, not to the human species as such. Nevertheless, in the 20th century, communist countries were heavy polluters, and the USSR was not more ecological than the US. If Lenin adopted productivism and Taylorism in 1919, he could have thought otherwise. I am not fighting over the term: if “Anthropocene” is widely understood, let’s go for it. The most important thing is to understand how climate change modifies our perception of life, and how artists are adapting to this new situation in order to create new visions of time and space. The ethical responsibility of any citizen is to fight against this global deterioration, but the ethical responsibility of the artist, at the specific level of his/her practice, is to produce representations and mental frames. Artists can of course be also militants, but it is not essential. On the same note, art cannot save the world, but, more importantly, I would say, it saves people, by enlightening or disturbing their minds. Not only by informing them: we have newspapers and books for that. We have to be “saved” one by one. Art has no collective reception, unlike cinema or music, it touches us individually. I would say that the core impact of artworks upon us comes from their faculty to re-edit reality: it is an alternative editing table for reality, as I argued in my book *Postproduction*. Politically speaking, art constitutes an individual intervention, the artist “intervenes” within reality, like a surgeon on a human body or a shaman interceding between humans and spirits. It can also be a deliberate interference, a visual bug. But all those notions are about resistance.

KH: Your notion of co-activity suggests a form of coexistence beyond identification. Could this be understood as a shift from empathy as projection toward resonance or affective attunement within more-than-human relations? Can empathy be extended to non-human entities without turning them into metaphors for human concerns? How, then, do you distinguish between resonance and depoliticization?

NB: Nowadays, empathy seems to be widely directed towards non-humans. Machines pretend to be our friends, exploiting humans' capacity to project their feelings towards anything. That is what fetishism is about. We start by projecting our feelings upon a teddy bear or a doll, and we end up displaying our intimacy to our AI. So, empathy has no object, because we tend to humanize any object. This is what is now called "automatic alterity," which is the dominant relational regime today. This regime leads to a dangerous depoliticized sphere, because democracy concerns people (*demos*) but not the tools they use. If politics includes AI, then it becomes metapolitics, which is embodied today by automatized deadly weapons and automatic mass surveillance. Against that depoliticization process, whose nucleus would be the exclusion of human control over machines, I proposed the concept of co-activity, an inclusive way of thinking. For an artist, it means the construction of a relational space, composed of subjects rather than objects, a space including multiple agencies, multiple others. Artists have to disrupt the "machine to human" system, which is quickly establishing itself before our eyes, by inventing a "human and others" system. It is interesting that you oppose "depoliticization" and "resonance," because it was a main theme of my exhibition for Gwangju Biennale in 2024, *Pansori: A Soundscape of the 21st Century*. Its first part was placed under the sign of the feedback effect, i.e., saturation, suffocation, lack of space. A feedback effect is so strident that it does not allow resonance. It might be a metaphor for our current situation.

KH: From the perspective of architecture and spatial practice, what distinguishes translation as an ethical and political operation from its reduction to mere compatibility with dominant formats of circulation and valuation? When architectural space is increasingly shaped by technical protocols, temporal regimes, and standards of communicability, how can translation produce distance, friction or delay, rather than merely optimizing legibility, mobility and exchange within existing systems of power?

NB: Translation has two sides: it can be an act of interpretation, a reload. Also, as Walter Benjamin argues in *The Task of the Translator*, it is an act of preservation. A text survives by being translated. On the other hand, translation can be about adaptation and compromise. But I also consider the mathematical signification of the word: a displacement, a transfer. Since the 1990s, architecture has entered into the sphere of post-production: to mention only French architects, Lacaton & Vassal or PCA-Stream developed a practice of recycling buildings, which makes me think of the Japanese art of kintsugi, which consists in repairing objects with gold powder. Their reflection goes into space, processes, and the use of the existing, rather than the cult of the new building-object. We are now far from the “Bilbao effect” produced by Frank Gehry, whose style is linked to the 1980s and Jeff Koons sculptures. No more “Bilbao effect:” we need an architecture with a better scenario, an architecture of translations, in the mathematical meaning of the term: displacing the stakes of architecture from style to the production of new ways of living. In art too, it is about translations: when Philippe Parreno inquires about an exhibition project, the question is not the size of the space, but “How much time do I have?” It is a translation from space to time, from volume to duration.

KH: You argue that molecular art insists on the singularity of each form of life against standardization. Is singularity today a political value, an aesthetic one—or a fragile remainder within an increasingly algorithmic world? If contemporary art prepares us for a world of lethal entanglement, is this preparation emancipatory, or does it risk normalizing ecological catastrophe—especially when the invisible (viruses, particles, chemicals) has become a primary historical agent? How can art engage such forces without aestheticizing catastrophe?

NB: Let’s first define this “Molecular Art:” Dora Budor, Max Hooper Schneider, Pamela Rosenkranz, and many other artists who emerged in the 2000s, are observing the molecular structure of social realities, the atomic relations that compose the world. In *Inclusions*, I defined the stakes of this new tendency as such: “If the revelation of the social relations hidden within our relations to things was the major theme of Marxist thought, the Anthropocene has extended this reflection to the whole of the living, clearly showing that our relations to the ‘natural’ world reflect the totality of social relations.” As exchange value has become the

common denominator of all forms of existence, with a price tag on all of them, it is crucial to shift our gaze, to draw it toward the molecular level of reality (made up of dust, fluids, gases, etc.). What I call molecular anthropology is the study of the human effects, traces and imprints on the universe, and the interaction of humans with non-humans. So, I don't think there is any normalization or aestheticization in the works of those artists, rather an inquiry, an analysis. Artists who currently deal with the causes or effects of climate change are not making it spectacular. Anyway, was Pablo Picasso "normalizing" bombings when he painted *Guernica*? I believe in a forgotten quality of the artwork, clearly expressed by Paul Klee when he said that art does not represent the visible, but makes the invisible visible. Representing the fluxes of capital, the trajectory of the teargas or the path of invisible pollution might be the most political gesture today. It is the opposite of a situation where the blind are leading the blind.

KH: Does this focus on the molecular level also shift our understanding of the value of life, especially in a context where all forms of existence are increasingly reduced to quantification and exchange? Can artistic practices intervene in this logic of valuation without becoming part of it?

NB: From my perspective, the value of life forms is not absolute, because they all are correlated to their neighbors, caught within a net of inter-dependencies and cooperation. I would rather introduce the idea of the *relational value* of life forms, as opposed to the traditional notions of *exchange value* and *use value*. It is important to read Charles Darwin today, because he is much more subversive than one might think. The theory of evolution presents life as unpredictable and adaptive, always tending towards diversification. At the end of his life, Darwin privileged the "beauty criterion" to the "struggle for life," arguing that the notion of beauty was the main factor of evolution. In parallel, art is also a permanent invention of new forms of existence. It brings brain-diversity, infinite neurodivergence, against the modernist process which consists of standardizing behaviors in the name of calculation and rationalization.

KH: If contemporary environments are designed to maximize flow, transparency, and continuous availability, can architecture still intervene at the level of time—by producing delay, interruption or temporal density—or has duration itself become fully formatted by capital, such that even

slowness functions as a neutralized experiential value rather than a site of political or aesthetic resistance, or reflective distance?

NB: As a young man, my vision of architecture was deeply influenced by Guy Debord, Ivan Chitchevlov, and the Situationist International. I have limited knowledge of the architectural field, but I always kept *la dérive*, the urban drift, as a mental background. Also, the utopian city imagined by Constant. So, I never saw architecture as limited to the building itself. It is a way of acting upon the environment. Any architect has to diagnose a complex situation, find effective solutions, and embody them in a vision he or she knows how to implement. Architecture is also a meeting point for various forms of human knowledge, a link between theoretical thought, art, and technology. It is the art of inhabiting the world. Artists can envision time in many ways, and play with it, but architects have to deal with obligations and norms, constraints which shift their creativity to the use of the buildings: what are the new ways of inhabiting? How can we use the world we build? It implies time—rhythms. In a 24/7 productivist world, the speed of life takes on a political connotation, and accelerationism is everywhere. Slowness in itself becomes an act of resistance.

KH: In one of your lectures, you define beauty as “the energetic capacity of a form to resist interpretive exhaustion.” How can beauty still work in this sense in a culture of immediacy and constant circulation?

NB: To answer your question I must give a definition of Beauty. Every work of art can be compared to the emission of a signal, and we know that every signal needs energy to maintain itself. If it is loaded with this energy, an artwork will resist entropy and its fate as waste, an energy that can be used by future viewers—once “translated” into their own context. This energy is like a propelling force, which is to me the only universal definition of “beauty” as a concept. It has an equivalent in every culture, but it is always a combination of formal mastery, visual and intellectual complexity, and the artist’s ability to encode intense information, thoughts, and sensations into matter, to capture the issues of their time. In the current times, marked by the volatility of signs, “beautiful” is mistaken for “attractive.” Today, there are more or less three billion images produced every day and circulating on social media, so the “economy of attention” is central. But would you choose a life partner only because he or she is

spectacularly good-looking? Beauty is something else. It has something to do with sustainability, with time. Tamara de Lempicka was the most successful artist in the 1930s, or Banksy nowadays, but I feel sorry for them, their works are not the most beautiful of their times. They are only the most attractive. There is the same difference between pulsion and desire.

Interview conducted by Andreja Prokopijević and Sara Dragišić.

