

## **The idle goddess.**

### **Notes about post-relational anthropology and art.**

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In the last decades, we have witnessed the emergence of both “relational art” and “relational anthropology”. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the connection, or better, the relation, between both. From there we will look at their aftermath- what has come after relational art and anthropology?

### **Relational art and its critics.**

At the turn of this century, Nicolas Bourriaud’s book *Relational Esthetics* (2002) presented a generation of artists who worked with social relations, rather than objects. Felix Gonzalez Torres, made piles of candy in geometrical forms, like pyramids or rectangles. But the artwork was not in its material form: these piles of candy were offered to the public, until the pile was emptied and filled with candy again. The “art work” was in the act of giving and taking candy, in the gift exchange. Bourriaud described “relational art” as “taking as its theoretical horizon the whole of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space”(2002:14) Art is a situation of encounter (Bourriaud 2002:18) “All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed by it.”(2002:18). The form of the art work is in the relations it establishes: to produce a form is to create the conditions for an exchange. The artist becomes a mediator, a person

that fosters and provides situations of exchange, rather than a creator of objects. For Bourriaud, relational art practices establish particular social relations for particular people; the artist tries to keep a personal contact with the public that participates in the exchange, fostering what he calls a “friendship culture” (Bourriaud 2002:32), in contraposition to the impersonal, mass production of the culture industries. These practices open alternative spaces of possibility, what he calls micro-utopias: “Relational art” doesn’t pretend to lead a general revolution, but modest, local interventions: “social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies” (Bourriaud 2002:31).

One work by Francis Allys, *When faith moves mountains* (2002) could be another good example of these “friendship cultures”. The idea behind the project was to move a mountain, quite literally: to move a dune to the outskirts of the city of Lima, Peru. The project counted with the participation, in different forms, of several people: a film-maker a curator, a professor at the university of Lima and his students. They convinced 800 students to participate in this project, which consisted in working for a whole day moving sand with a shovel from a 500 meter-long dune.

A lot could be said about what this work represented (in relation to Peru, urbanism and underdevelopment) but what seems more interesting is that this is a totally futile project that generates, according to one critic, ‘conviviality’, or the founding moment of a community” (Medina et al, 2005:118) amongst the group of people who participated in the action, giving their labor for free. This is an act of collective waste of labor that because of its very obvious uselessness, ends up taking the form of a celebration. On the other hand, however, there is a

clear separation between the action itself and its result as a work of art, which in this case took the form of a film and a set of photographs that have been shown in different international art venues. The “work of art” is this documentation, and as such, it belongs to the artist. Allÿs himself explains this separation between him and the participants: “ The second part (the film) belongs to me clearly” ...”Whether the first part, the day itself, belongs to me, to the volunteers...to Cuauh and Rafa...[ the curator and the film-maker]. To the dune itself, I would personally find it difficult to tell “(Medina et al. 2005: 143).

The art critic Grant Kester has pointed out to the ambiguities of these forms of “relation”: while the event or action itself is participatory, its outcome- the artwork, the document, the video that will be shown in art venues around the world, belongs to the artist. At another level, as Kester also points out, Allÿs and his collaborators seem to have decided to involve middle-class students in the action, rather than the residents of the shantytown near the dune, to avoid being too literally “activist”, too obviously related to the problems of the shantytown, or on the opposite, to avoid being accused of exploiting shantytown dwellers for his art project. Allÿs project remains in this sense at a safe “poetic distance” from the actual site of the dune, its immediate realities (Kester 2011: 72). In more general terms, Kester questions relational art projects because they reduce social life and social exchange to an art form produced by artists to be displayed in art spaces.

In opposition to these processes of aesthetization or artistification of the everyday, Kester defends collaborative projects that subsume art in social

practice. In his recent book “The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context” (2011) Kester discusses several examples of this “collaborative art”. Amongst them, the Dialogue collective, working in central India, with an Adivasi (“indigenous”) community. In Kester’s words, the art collective “analyzed the spatial choreography of village, life, the protocols governing the movement and aggregation of bodies, and the distribution of power, labor, and access among men, women, and children” (Kester 2011: 79). In other terms, they did fieldwork. Out of this fieldwork, “the water pump quickly emerged as a central nexus of meaning in village life”. So they developed plans for restructuring the pump sites. Their intervention was rather simple: building smooth concrete pads, more efficient pumps, and decorated enclosures. More than the symbolism of the decoration, Kester argues, what is important about the project is that it provided women (who are in charge of water in the village) with a protected space of interaction. As opposed to Allÿs work, Dialogue would have chosen to engage directly with the tensions, problems and divisions of the community they work with, rather than stepping them aside and looking for a metaphorical image that may be effective on screen, like a line of people moving a dune (Kester 2011:95).

It is quite clear that the work of Dialogue operates from a practice that anthropologists could readily identify as fieldwork, while that would be much more difficult to say of Allÿs’ projects. And yet Dialogue’s work can also open many questions. Like for example, what process was their “fieldwork” following? Was the “analysis of the spatial choreography“of the village just an act of observation, or did it involve asking people in the village what did they want

from them? It is clear that the art collective had a complex understanding of the internal tensions and differences within the community, but, what about the tensions and differences that were created by their presence in the village? And what about the power they seem to attribute themselves of affecting certain “changes” in the life of the village? That is less clear from Kester’s description. In other terms, the problems of “agency” that one could identify in Allÿs work could also be found, if at another level, in long-standing, community –oriented ethnographic projects, like Dialogue’s.

Some art critics have reacted to both relational esthetics and community art practices, claiming on the opposite for the need to return to the autonomy of art. Claire Bishop (2012) for example has argued that the end of art is not to generate a “friendship culture”, or to create communities or foster collaboration, but to question, antagonize, and promote dissent. In this sense, she champions works that has a critical or “antagonistic” approach, appealing for “more bold, affective troubling forms of participatory art” that create “artificial hells” (Bishop 2012:6-7) rather than Bourriaud’s everyday micro-utopias.

We could find some examples of this “antagonistic” approach in the work of Santiago Sierra. In “21 Anthropometric Modules made from Human Faeces by the People of Sulabh International, India” (2007) Sierra showed 21 monoliths made of human excrement, which had been collected by a charity in India, Sulabh, employing lower cast Dalits whose job is cleaning the streets and public toilets of bodily waste. The feces were dried and chemically processed to become odorless, and were showed at a London gallery as human-size

monoliths, just coming out of the crates in which they were shipped to London.

When asked about “exploitation” by a *Time Out* journalist, Sierra replied:

‘Exploitation is everywhere, especially in a city built on imperial foundations like London. It’s in the water and the coffee we drink.’ (Ward 2007)

Sierra doesn’t shy away from it: he has clearly made of economic exploitation the central theme of his work. He doesn’t pretend to express generosity, to create communities, or to renounce to authorship on behalf of the public, but on the opposite, he makes manifest the mechanisms of artistic authorship in participatory art as a form of exploitation. But precisely because of that, Sierra’s work is also made of social relations, but of a radically opposed kind than “gifts”: after all, commodity exchanges are also a form of “social relation”. Furthermore, Sierra’s work is clearly recognizable as art: it doesn’t try to disappear in everyday life, his works are still “sculptures”, in the sense of authored exhibits presented in art galleries. In fact he explicitly claims to be a minimalist with a guilt complex (Sierra 2004: 33): instead of drawing lines or making monoliths with materials, he makes them with people. And the results are art works sold in international art galleries.

It could be argued that there is a clear difference between the projects of Dialogue with the Advasi and Sierra’s work with the Dalits. The first presents itself as a collaborative project that helps ameliorate the life of the villagers, while the second quite shamelessly defines itself in terms of exploitation. But a closer look at these projects would show a more complex picture. It is difficult to assess from the descriptions, but we could ask to what extent the interventions

of the Dialogue collective in the villages have been consensual or have generated resistance. On the other hand, in spite of Sierra's cultivation of a bad boy image, his project with the Dalits was actually sponsored by the charity that employs them, Sulabh, which didn't accept any payment because they understood that actually, this work was good publicity for them (they actually kept one of the monoliths)<sup>1</sup>. In this sense Sierra's project was collaborative. Maybe we can't take for granted that just because a collective is well-intentioned, serious, does research, and spends a lot of time on the field, their work will be more democratic and co-operative with the community than an international art star whose ultimate goal is to make a shocking piece for the international art market. In both cases, the issues at stake are the actual power relations, and the play of agencies that are established in the ground, rather than the good intentions. And still, all of these projects entail different forms of working with relations; in a way, they are all "relational".

### **Relational and post-relational Anthropology.**

In the field of Anthropology, the "Relational" turn in the last decades has been represented, authors like Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner, Phillippe Descola or Eduardo Viveiros de Castro-although they have substantial differences, which I won't discuss here, they share an interest in *intrinsic* relations (Jensen 2012:49), that is to say, relations that come first, shaping the terms or entities they are connecting. To put it in Strathern's terms, the gift as a relation takes precedence over the entities it constitutes. Gifts are not a given objects, but relations that

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200709\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200709_1024.php), last accessed 10/2/2104.

happen; they are not there before they happen; they cannot be easily be naturalized or reduced to a sociological model (like “exchange”). As opposed to intrinsic relations, extrinsic relations would be a result, rather than a premise, of the connection between the terms. In extrinsic relations, the terms or entities connected would remain unchanged- since the connection or relation is external to the term or entity.

These questions as we see are explicitly ontological. An intrinsic relation is a theory and practice of *being*, in which things (terms or entities) are *because* of a relation. So is an extrinsic relation, in which the relation comes second to the thing, and does not substantially add to or change to its being. In these terms, they stand for radically different ontological assumptions.

Why were and are these anthropologists interested in intrinsic relations?

Precisely because they were interested in these ontological questions. In fact, the proponents of relational anthropology have also been claimed as the forefathers of the “ontological turn” (Henare et al 2007). The notion of (social, constructed) relations as secondary to (natural, given) being, of the externality of relations, reproduces the ontological assumptions of what Latour has called “modernity”, Strathern’s “Euro-American understanding”, or Descola’s “naturalism”. These authors on the other hand, in response to their ethnographies, were and are proposing to describe reality in different terms, terms that may invert the sequence, from the primacy of beings or facts over relations to the other way around.

This “relational” move has been contentious in various ways. First, it could be confused with a wider and longer-lasting project of shifting the focus of social enquiry from structures to connections, interactions and networks, where “connection” or “relation” would be described in affirmative terms as expanding social worlds and fighting back the individualist and alienating tendencies of modern society. In these terms, the ontological assumption behind the “relation” is that it is external: it comes after the fact, after the individual, to construct a social world- a network that is added up upon already pre-existing, given individuals. On the opposite, relational anthropologists have sometimes studied “relations that separate” (Strathern 1988) processes of differentiation from ontological totalities, rather than connections that unite separated entities. The reversal of the gift is a good example of that: rather than describing the gift as a constructed relation that builds connections between already existing individuals, the gift in Anthropology is often described as a process that produces hierarchy- processes of self-differentiation between a given totality. The reference to Dumont here would not be irrelevant <sup>2</sup>, as well as to Mauss and other forefathers of Anthropology. In many ways “relational anthropology” is coming back to classical questions in the discipline. Or perhaps better than ‘coming back” we could say that it is “having recourse to” classical concepts of anthropology, re-reading, re-inventing these concepts. For Martin Holbraad, one of the advanced students of relational anthropology, a concept is recursive when “it changes every time it is used to express something” (Holbraad 2012: 76), and

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<sup>2</sup> I believe that hierarchy is not, essentially, a chain of super-imposed commands, nor even a chain of beings of decreasing dignity, nor yet a taxonomic tree, but a relation that can succinctly be called “the encompassing of the contrary.”(Dumont 1980: 239).

this change is built upon the previous uses. It is also important to understand that what Holbraad and others ( Henare 2007) are proposing in fact is a radical criticism of the model of representation, that we change our very understanding of what a “concept” is: a concept may not be just a representation separated from the thing it represents, it may be an outcome of the thing itself. In this sense, the internalist use of the concept of relation “widens” it beyond the externalist sense of relation as establishing a connection.

Second, this approach has particular implications in understanding, precisely, the relation between ethnographic objects and the concepts used to describe them. The objective of relational anthropology is to ‘establish a continuity between the object of description and the description itself’ (Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, 2009: 31). Not to represent reality but to establish a continuity. That does not mean that the concept of “relation” is borrowed from an ethnographic discourse, on the opposite, it is explicitly invented by the anthropologist to describe the ontological assumptions encountered in the field. But this invention, it is argued, is not discontinuous from this assumptions (as in “etic” theories of “emic” discourses), but an extension of the world described. The concept would be not an abstract representation, but a recursive extension of its object.

This does not mean that relational anthropology literally transposes native ontologies. That has been one of the main criticisms of the so-called “ontological term”- the “reification” of a cultural /ontological other, and the uncritical assumption that the anthropologist was only describing this other

culture/ontology. This reification would be a throwback to cultural essentialism after decades of cultural critique. But that argument falls short of understanding the relational argument. When Strathern and Wagner approach Melanesian thought or Viveiros de Castro elicits Amerindian cosmology, they are clearly and explicitly “inventing” a relation- they are not simply and literally describing or representing “relational ontologies”. What is relational, is Anthropology itself.

In this sense, the objective of a relational anthropology would be a bit more complex than simply establishing a distinction between “our” Western ontology, which would be described as dualist and representational, in opposition to other ontologies, that would be, on the opposite, relational and recursive. This argument would be flawed, first of all, because it is built on the basic premise of the very model it wants to question: dualism, by establishing oppositions built upon terms that pre-exist the relation: us and them, West and rest, dualist and relational ontologies. A truly relational argument cannot be based on the premise of the existence of two radically opposed objects before the relation that constitutes them.

In recent years, a number of voices in Anthropology are proposing to move beyond “relational Anthropology”. Some authors contend that not everything can be reduced to relations, participation, networks: there is always a moment of separation and cut (Candea et al 2015 ). For example, in his work on the relations between anthropology and archeology, Tom Yarrow found that it is precisely the disconnection and difference between the ways in which these disciplines produce knowledge what sets up the possibility for productive

engagement (Yarrow and Garrow 2010). And yet this literature doesn't question relational ontology deep down, but it is only extending it. Following Strathern's critique of Latour, in "Cutting the Network" (1996), Candea et al. (2015) defend that any relation produces a form of disengagement, just like any detachment is premised on a previously existing relation (Candea et al. 24: 2015). But the primacy of relations over entities is not really questioned. In fact, when Morten Axel Pedersen proposes a post-relational Anthropology, he starts from the assumption that the task of anthropology has always been to invent relations; a "post-relational" anthropology would only intensify this invention of relations, to the extent that the concept of "relation": itself would become superfluous: "By continually reinventing the relation, anthropology must eventually come to obviate this concept by making the intensive basis of social life so conventional that it needs no further mention." (Pedersen, 2012: 64). A post-relational anthropology is still premised on the relation, coming after the relation, only bringing it to its logical end: when "everything" becomes relational, there is no need to mention "relations" in the first place.

This conclusion brings forth the central question of relational thought: eventually, it is all-encompassing. Everything becomes a relation, there is no possible escape from it. And if the relation becomes all-encompassing, tautological, a relation is a relation is a relation.... Could we ask if it is a useful tool for thought? Even risking being accused of falling back in dualist thinking. Is it possible to think and make in non-relational terms? Is a non-relational anthropology, a non-relational art, thinkable? And if so would it be desirable? To address this question, we should consider first how are relational art and

relational anthropology similar- or indeed related.

### **Relational management.**

We could say that relational art and relational anthropology are indeed based on similar premises. For Bourriaud, “art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.” (Bourriaud 2002:107). This may be read alongside a relational anthropology that is premised on the notion that relations take precedence over the entities they constitute. If relational esthetics and relational anthropology are proposing analogous ontological questions, what is the connection between them?

According to Viveiros de Castro, Lévi-Strauss once defined art as the ecological reserve of the savage mind in the modern world (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 489); the modern artist would be the bricoleur of our times, a modern “primitive”, for art makes people out of things, instead of things out of people.

This “relational” vision of the work of art is deeply engrained in the philosophical esthetics of modernity, what Jacques Rancière has called the “esthetic regime” of art, based in the writings of authors like Schiller. According to Rancière, Schiller’s aesthetic education was proposing a fully fledged revolution, a revolution of sensible existence. Aesthetics, after Schiller, does not simply constitute a separate field of practice based on the “autonomy” of art. It is not art that is “autonomous”, but the mode of experience that aesthetics is proposing (Rancière 2002:133), a mode of experience based on play. This is precisely what is central

about the notion of “play”; for Schiller “Play’s freedom is contrasted to the servitudes of work” (Rancière 2009: 31). Work is what we do for a living, out of necessity, but it is not necessarily what we want to do, something we identify with; play, as opposed to work, would be a free activity were people can afford to be themselves. Schiller’s proposal to put play at the center of existence, is not just a proposal to educate good, responsible citizens, but also the utopian promise of a different form of life, in which what we do and who we are, work and life, are not separated: “a collective life that does not rend itself into separate spheres of activities, a community where art and life, art and politics, life and politics are not severed one from another” (Rancière 2002:136).

The modern aesthetic utopia emerged as a critique of capitalism, clearly in line with the Marxist critique of alienation of capitalist labour, where workers sell their workforce for a wage, but do not identify the product of their work as their own creation. The exception to this rule would be artists, who would identify the product of their labour as their creation. The utopian promise of communism would be based on overcoming these separations between work and art, praxis and poiesis. The esthetic utopia, and modern art after it, put this question at the center of its concerns. In Bourriaud’s terms “modern art rejects to separate the finished product from existence; Praxis= poiesis. The act of creation is to create oneself”<sup>3</sup>.

Hence art, or better the esthetic regime of art, appear as a “relational” utopia in direct confrontation to the alienation, separation, representation, commodification that characterize modern capitalism. Not just the ecological

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<sup>3</sup> L’art moderne [...] refuse de considérer comme séparés le produit fini et l’existence à mener. Praxis égale *poiesis*. Créer, c’est se créer » (Bourriaud, 1999 : 13.)

reserve of the savage mind, but also the promise of a future “relational” society. Perhaps it may sound disingenuous to ask if this relational utopia has been achieved. But it is not, if we start by thinking to what extent relational forms of artistic practice, which in theory are in direct opposition to capitalist production and the society of the spectacle, in practice often end up being used by the system they question. Or even worse, they may end up being instrumentalised to justify the dismantling of actual social services, by channeling notions of empowerment, creativity and collaboration, becoming devices of neoliberal governmentality (Miessen 2011). Claire Bishop has shown how during the New Labour governments in the UK, community art was embraced as a sort of “soft social engineering” (Bishop 2012:5), promoting “participation” in the arts as a form of preventing social exclusion. For Bishop, social “inclusion” for New Labour was deeply rooted in a neoliberal agenda, seeking to “enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world.” (Bishop 2012:12). Notions of “creativity” as innate talent of the socially excluded, an energy that could be transformed from a destructive to a constructive impulse, are also quite common in these cultural policies. Invocations to the “big society” by conservative governments in the UK or the “participative society” in Holland only extend these proposals to a much more general political framework, envisioning a society of empowered citizens that participate and self-organize, instead of depending from the welfare state.

The “new spirit of capitalism”, as it has been described by sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello (2006), is purely relational, built upon an ontology of the network,

an open plane of immanence, in Deleuzian terms, opposed to the hierarchies of structure and representation of previous, industrial models of capitalism. The immanent network privileges relations, communication, encounter, openness and indeterminacy over structures and objects. The new capitalism would expand horizontally by extending networks, establishing relations, opening communications, encountering innovation, rather than vertically by producing structures and objectified commodities. In fact art practice is central to the redefinition of capitalism; “the New Spirit” has incorporated the artistic utopia into the new managerial discourse, in order to build a new identity for the worker: from alienated factory wage laborer to “creative” professional. In this context, not only have art practices been re-appropriated by the society of the spectacle, but in more general terms, the artistic critique of capitalism has been incorporated in an hegemonic discourse in which workers are invited to identify with their jobs, participate, be “motivated” and “creative”, and work in their free time.

As it turns out, then, it is our own, “Western” society, that has become the paradigm of the “relational”. To come back to anthropology, this point further questions the argument that anthropologist study “non-Western” relational ontologies in opposition to our “Western” dualist ontology. The fact is on the other hand, that the emergence of a relational anthropology in the last decades is not only parallel to the rise of relational art, but also to the (recursive) reformulation of capitalism as a relational system, a “participative society”. The use of the very same terms in anthropology, art and management :network, creativity, participation and so forth, should at least have given us a hint of this

“relation”.

We come back then to the question: if everything is “relational”, what does the concept of “relation” explain? And if there is a dominant form of “relation”- through the paradigm for capitalist management, don’t the other forms ( say art or anthropology) risk becoming reduced to the former? Can we say that in the participative society, “all relations have become toxic”? ( Bromberg 2013)

### **Non-relationality.**

In reaction the re-appropriation into new forms of capitalism of all the critical gestures of the past, one possible answer would be to reject relations- a non-relational gesture that puts forward the irreducibility of the object to any network, connection, or process of becoming. The philosopher Graham Harman, for example, has advocated that the primacy of relations over things is no longer a liberating idea, since it reduces things to their pragmatic impact on humans and on each other (Harman 2014). In these terms, he has proposed a non-relational aesthetics, an art without relations, concerned with objects deeper than their relation to humans.

In recent years these radical forms of “new materialism”, like Harman’s non-relational aesthetics, are being widely read in contemporary art circles. On example would be Pierrre Huyghes’ recent work. In Documenta 13, Huyghe displayed, amongst other things, a Modigliani sculpture whose head was covered by a bee-hive. There was no apparent “relation” between sculpture and bee-hive.

Both existent independently, indifferent to each other. Or to the public that observed them at Documenta. In his own terms:

“You don’t display things. You don’t make a mise-en-scène, you don’t design things, you just drop them. And when someone enters that site, things are in themselves, they don’t have a dependence on the person. They are indifferent to the public. You are in a place of indifference. Each thing, a bee, an ant, a plant, a rock, keeps growing or changing.”( Huyge in Mooney 2013)

And yet this non-relational gesture, the return to notions like “object” and “detachment” could induce the suspicion that these “new materialisms” can be read in part as a return to order, to classical esthetics, to autonomy, after decades of “heteronomy”, in which relational and social art practices were not only dissolving the art object, but the autonomy of art itself, disappearing in everyday life. Is the return to the object a return to the singular work of art, to the lonely artist, and even further to the institution? We should discuss Harman’s proposal at some length before reaching a conclusion.

Harman starts by proposing the term “Non-relational esthetics”. And the first surprising statement is that this is not meant as a retort to Bourriaud’s *Relational esthetics*. For Harman, what Bourriaud means by relations are staged encounters between humans. Harman opposes relationality in a larger sense- as questioning the independence of artworks from their social, political, and even physical settings or their commercial value. Or in general terms: relationality questions the independence of objects from other objects. Harman’s philosophy, on the

other hand, defends the irreducible independence of objects from other objects. Speculative realism (his philosophy) questions the primacy of relations over objects, since relations reduce things to their pragmatic impact. And this is no longer a liberating idea, for Harman.

Objects can be reduced by relations in two ways: first, to their constitutive particles (Downward) as it is often made in science; second to their effects, or Upwards, like the social sciences often do. And for Harman, “to defend this view is to commit one self to a world in which everything is already all that it can be” (Harman 2014) where all affordances are already there. For Harman, these reductions are forms of knowledge, attempts to explain objects. But Philosophy and more importantly Art are not forms of knowledge, and therefore don't need to reduce the object to knowledge. On the opposite, the art object can resist to knowledge and reduction.

Harman finds inspiration in the philosophy of Heidegger and the art criticism of Clement Greenberg. Both point to the existence of a background of objects that are irredeemable to the surface of our knowledge of the world. At this point Harman acknowledges that his argument may be mistaken with a high modernist conception of the autonomy of the artwork- which is arguably what Clement Greenberg stood for. And Harman concedes that to an extent, when he marks a clear separation between, science on the one hand, that pretends to reduce the object to knowledge, and on the other hand philosophy and art, who don't pretend to know objects, but acknowledge their ignorance.

However, Harman does not agree with the formalist criticism that the likes of Greenberg or Fried would make of “theatrical” or performative practices in art since the sixties – in which the limit between the artwork and the spectator was blurred. For Harman, theatricality, or theater, does not attempt to explain the object, and in this sense it is not relational. In fact for Harman the theatrical is the non-relational, since theatre is less a site for observation than for pity, fear and impersonation – a place where we do not observe what is portrayed but become it, through mimesis in the actor’s rather than the illustrator’s sense of the term.

The paradox of this argument is that in the end, what Harman identifies as non-relational, is quite similar to what Bourriaud had called, previously, relational art, and Harman describes as staged relations between humans. But then what is relationality? For Harman, it seems, relationality is the attempt to reduce an object to another, to “paraphrase” it, either downward or upward, to its parts or to its effects. Mimesis, impersonation, pity, fear, would not be a form of reduction in these terms. Now this is a rather difficult, not to say, contradictory, argument. Perhaps we could say that theatrical mimesis is always very aware of its limits- the impossibility of reduction of one to another. For Harman, we should clarify, people are also objects amongst other objects. And objects are irreducible to each other. Art would express this paradox- the impossibility of establishing a true relation. This is what Harman describes in terms of the “allure” of objects, a sensation in which we distinguish between the object itself and its immediate qualities creating an opening for a different level of reality to enter, a reality in which sensual qualities are not directly presented as the necessary part of objects, nor objects as unified wholes. But at this point it is very difficult to

understand what does distinguish Harman's speculative realism so radically from classical aesthetics. The esthetic experience remains an event of encounter between someone who perceives and an object of perception. And that is not that far away from what Kant understood the esthetic judgment.

So after all, some contemporary claims for the recognition of objects could be read in terms of a return to more classical notions of aesthetics, from Kant to Greenberg. And yet this does not mean that these apparent "returns to the object" are anti-political, in opposition to relational art and aesthetics. As Rancière has argued, the contradiction between autonomy and heteronomy, the detachment of art from life and its dissolution in everyday life, are integral to the politics of aesthetics since its very origins. The founding paradox of the aesthetic regime is that art is art insofar as it is also something other than art: as far as it brings a promise of emancipation, the elimination of art as a separate reality, and its transformation into a form of life (Rancière 2009: 36).

But on the other hand, this movement towards the total dissolution of art into everyday life, has often been counteracted by the opposite movement, of protecting and reinforcing the "autonomy" of art, of resisting its dissolution into everyday life. This is what Rancière calls the "politics of the resistant form", which "encloses the political promise of aesthetic experience in art's very separation, in the resistance of its form to every transformation into a form of life"(Rancière 2009:44). For Rancière the persistent tension of the "politics of becoming-life in art" and the "politics of the resistant form", or heteronomy and autonomy, is constitutive of the politics of aesthetics. It may appear self-evident

how heteronomy, or the impulse to dissolve art into everyday life, is political: the dissolution of art in everyday life is premised upon the utopian ideal that art has the power to transform society, that art has an effect. On the other hand, autonomy and detachment may appear as apolitical since they withdraw from the public debate. But to the contrary, what Rancière argues is that the autonomy of art is built precisely against the constitution of any specialized fields of practice and knowledge within a given social structure, proposing instead the construction of a community of sense against this very social structure. The apparent separation from other fields of practice, is in reality a form of questioning the very social division of labor into fields in modern society, the reduction of practice to labor, and hence the alienation of work from life. In other terms, the autonomy of art does not simply seek the recognition of the practice of art as another specialized profession, amongst other forms of work. But on the opposite, it questions these very notions of work, skill, and expertise. Aesthetics, after Schiller, does not simply constitute a separate field of practice based on the “autonomy” of art. It is not art that is “autonomous”, but the mode of experience that aesthetics is proposing (Rancière 2002:133), a mode of experience based on play, not work. This is precisely what is central about the notion of “play” for Schiller, as we have seen before. The visual allegory that Schiller and Rancière use to explain this point is a famous classical bust of Juno Ludovisi. The statue, for Schiller, is a self-contained “free appearance”.

“To a modern ear, this expression tends to evoke the self-containment celebrated by Clement Greenberg. But Schiller’s self-containment is not about work’s material autonomy. What the free appearance of the Greek statue

manifests is the essential characteristics of divinity, its idleness or indifferency. Standing before the idle goddess, the spectator is, too in a state that Schiller defines as that of idleness or free play.” (Rancière, 2009:27).

In this sense, the Juno Ludovisi, like works of relational art in the modern regime of esthetics, points to a political horizon of liberation, of free play. In spite of its infinite detachment, and remoteness, it is also a political work of art- also establishes a relation, if a “relation that separates”, to make reference to Strathern once again.

**Conclusions: there is no way out of relations. But that may be OK.**

Reading Harman’s proposal for a Non-relational esthetics, one could say that it may not go very far away from what esthetics has been all along, in what Rancière has called the “Esthetic regime”. But that does not mean that proposals for a non-relational art are anti-political. On the opposite, they complement relational art, because they also contain the promise of liberation, if in a radically different way. Saying that, ultimately, I am implying that non-relational art is indeed relational, since it is the result of a relation- the esthetic regime. That, of course, may be my biased reading as an anthropologist, whose task, as we have seen, is to invent relations, or in Harman’s terms, reducing objects to knowledge. But to be honest I think that is what Harman- or philosophy in general, does too. Michael Scott, one of the anthropologists that has taken more time and effort to critically assess the legacy of relational anthropology, has presented his own version of what would be an “Object-oriented” anthropology, analogous to

Harman's attempts in philosophy. Scott, working in Melanesia, like Strathern or Wagner, encountered forms of sociality that did not respond to their models of a cosmos in which everything is related, and where social agents need to cut relational continuity. Scott on the other hand encountered a context where the opposite was the case: relations had to be created, not cut. This was a world that presupposed then the existence of objects, *before* relations.

And yet, for Scott, this does not question the fact that relations do exist, and that indeed it is only through relations that knowledge is produced. If in fact any object exist before a relation, is something we can only assume *after* we have a established, or better, "invented" a relation with it.

In these terms, anthropology cannot escape relationality, nor does art. But that does not mean that the relations that art or anthropology invent have to be necessarily poisoned by other forms of relation that are dominant in our society-like management. It is not by withdrawing from, but by multiplying relations that these toxic connections may be overcome. If anything like a post-relational anthropology or art should exist, however, it should be premised on a critical awareness of the dangers of an all too pervasive relationality.

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