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Relational Aesthetics and Experience of Otherness

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ABSTRACT. In 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud thematized the aesthetical and political issue of an "art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" [Bourriaud, Nicolas (1998), *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Presses du Réel, p. 14]. Some critics has been raised regarding the real political impact of the art works used by Bourriaud as paradigmatic examples for his claim. In this paper, I argue that one way to explore further what is at stake in the open concept of relational aesthetics would be to consider the first person experience of the encounter with the other and the way it signifies. In this perspective, I then point out three landmarks in phenomenology and cognitive sciences, and use different art works to exemplify them: first I draw on the Husserlian descriptions of intersubjectivity to show how the other's behaviors can be part of an art form; second I refer to the enactive approach of Participatory Sense-Making as a convincing scheme for understanding collective dynamics of emergence in participative art; third I refer to Levinas' phenomenology to show that some aesthetical experiences might rely directly on an ethical sensibility.

1. Introduction

In 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud thematized the question of an "art taking as its

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theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (Bourriaud 1998, p. 14).² This new way of understanding and creating art was, for the author, induced by the necessity of a societal change; that is, a change in the way we exist socially. Today, one might think that this preoccupation with societal change is still valid. But what exactly does it mean to exist socially? In a critical paper questioning the real political impact of the artworks that Bourriaud uses as paradigmatic examples of relational aesthetics, and the very quality of the relationships induced by them, Claire Bishop asks: "But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The quality of the relationships in 'relational aesthetics' are never examined or called into question. [...] If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" (Bishop 2004, p. 65). We consider that these questions are totally valid and legitimate. But instead of looking for answers directly at the level of political theory as Bishop does, by referring to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, we think something could be gained by taking a step back and first examining the very subjective and experiential dimensions of social relations. What is it like to experience a relationship with the other? How does it feel? What is the meaning of such relationships from a first person point of view? Thus

² I am grateful to the audience at the annual conference of the European Society for Aesthetics 2019 for helpful comments. I would like to thank Sølvi Ystad and Peter Sinclair for their constructive proofreading of the manuscript.

we postulate that social cognition and phenomenology could provide meaningful insights for appreciating the experiential and embodied substrate of relational aesthetics. We consider this all the more important in regards to Bourriaud's project since the different ways in which we approach the experience of social relations correspond to different ways of understanding society, and thereby to different ways of building a societal project.

We will first try to clarify the context and motivation of our study by specifying its position with regard to Bourriaud's pioneering 1998 essay, and explain why we think the question of experience matters. In the second section, we will focus on the notion of intersubjectivity and explain how, although it is a necessary moment in the phenomenological description of relational art, it seems to us that it induces a somewhat reductive understanding of social relationship by placing it in the realm of universalism. In the third section, we will explain why we consider that the scheme of Participatory Sense-Making –i.e., the enactive approach to social cognition– could provide a first step away from the normativity of the intersubjective scheme by drawing our attention toward the autonomy of the interaction process itself. In the fourth section, we will draw on the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas in order to question the ethical significance of the social encounter. For Levinas, such an experience implies a specific sensibility: a sensibility to otherness itself, so to speak. In our conclusions, we will formulate the idea that this sensibility might be the very material of relational art.

Since the question of embodiment is central for both phenomenology and for the enactive approach, it will be used as a prism to highlight the contrasts between those different approaches to the social relationship.

2. Relational Aesthetics and Experience

In Bourriaud's view, any work of art could be considered from the relational prism: as a catalyst and medium for social connection. A painting, a sculpture, or any kind of artwork creates relations. But Bourriaud more specifically points out a group of artists who, in the 90's, were *using social relationship itself as the material of their works*. For this reason, contemporary art historians sometimes consider "relational aesthetics" to be something like a movement in contemporary art, corresponding to a specific period: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Felix-Gonzales Torres, Philippe Parreno, Raoul Marek, etc., being among the main figures of that movement. In this contribution, we want to distance ourselves from this historical concern. It seems unquestionable to us that, within the diversity of arts, artist's interest in the question of social relations far predates Bourriaud's essay. And hopefully it will also postdate it. Therefore we only wish to keep the formal definition of relational art as being concerned with "[art forms] where the substrate is intersubjectivity" as a starting point . And, from there, question what exactly is understood by the concept of "intersubjectivity"; that is, question the very material of relational art.

In his essay, Bourriaud called upon the transformative value of art: “In our post-industrial societies,” he writes, “the most pressing thing is no longer the emancipation of individuals, but the freeing-up of inter-human communications, the emancipation of the relational dimension of existence” (Bourriaud 1998, p. 60). More than twenty years after the publication of the essay, the question of the quality of our social relations is certainly still an important one. And it might still be true that art, or the arts, could play a role in the way we understand and create sociality. By drawing attention to some critical issues, by exploring innovative forms of social life, new ways of encountering the other, new ways of caring for the other and building society, art, whether blurred with life or not, could contribute to changing life. This is why we think relational aesthetics, in the sense of the study of the relational dimension of life as explored and realized in art, still matters. Let us now consider how a focus on the experiential dimension of sociality could contribute to this study.

What do we experience when we experience relational art ? We think we can distinguish two levels of experience : a) I can engage in a first person experience of the social relationship; but b) I can also experience the artwork from outside, that is from the distance of a third person perspective, as an observer. Of course, one could experience both viewpoints alternatively, but still, it would not be possible to confuse the two. Let us examine how those two different experiences are articulated.

The experience of engaging in person in the interaction, in the social relationship, could be considered as the authentic experience of the artwork, when staying outside could be considered to be a second hand experience of the artwork. When I am actively engaged in an artwork I somehow take part in its actualization. As a participant, I am part of it. As if it was not fully complete before. When I remain outside the interaction, as an observer, I see – that is, I experience – a system of social behavior. People, in front of me, are socially interacting. And their social interactions are the material the art piece is made of. But what could it mean phenomenologically –that is, not from a classical behaviorist point of view– *to see behavior*? We could phrase it this way; that, for the observer, a behavior has, like a coin, two undetachable sides: one side is the observable body moving as a thing, the other side is the experience that is manifested by the movements (we will come back to this in the next section with the notions of intersubjectivity and empathy). Observing a behavior implies some access to the experience of the behavioral entity, otherwise it would be reduced to solely mechanical movements. Therefore, experiencing a relational artwork as a spectator includes, through the double-sided structure of behavior, some understanding of the participants' experiences.

Behaviors are constrained and shaped by norms and structures: biological structures; material and technological structures, such as architecture and media; cultural structures, such as laws, language, social norms. Relational art makes and exhibits relational forms. By using

manageable norms, artists create a set of constraints and openings in which behaviors are to emerge. Examples might include a meal, a party, a game, etc. Ultimately, a relational artwork is a form, but a form that includes behaviors, that is a form inhabited by experience (it could be argued that this is not only true for relational art, but also for interactive installations).

In this sense, the first person experience of the subject who is directly engaged in the social interaction is indeed at the heart of relational art, for it is constitutive of what a social behavior is, that is to say, constitutive of the very material of relational art. This having been said, the spectators experience, from a viewpoint which remains outside the interaction and that grabs the whole system as a unity that includes the behaviors and the material and cultural system of constraints in which they emerge, is also essential to relational art, since without it there would be no artwork. This overhead view gives the art piece existence as a unity, as an object of the art world. And it is only thanks to this unifying grasp that a relational artwork can have political or societal impact: by showing how the social experience is shaped by material and cultural structures. Finally, both experiences – from the inside and outside– are necessary for relational art: the former as constitutive of the material the artwork is made of; the latter as the viewpoint from which a unity can be grasped as a work of art. In the next section, we will say more about this phenomenological structure through which the subject can access the experience of the other.

3. Intersubjectivity

In Husserlian phenomenology, *intersubjectivity* refers to (at least) two things: 1) the access to the experience of the other, also known as empathy (*empathy*), and, 2) reliant on this first step, the constitution of a shared world. Although Husserl's thoughts regarding how the subject accesses the experience of the other follow many meanders -from the empathy model developed in his *Cartesian Meditations* to the emphasis on the notion of flesh in *Ideas II*- we could argue that one central pattern in his approach to social experience is *commonality*.

In the Husserlian description, empathy relies on a mechanism of *introjection*, which could be summarized as follows (Husserl 1999). The subject is embodied. Her body is double sided: first it is a *leib*, living flesh, a body experienced from a first person perspective, as an engagement in possibilities, a body through which the world is constituted; and secondly, it is a *körper*, that is a material thing, an object in the world. The subject has an intimate understanding of this *leib/körper* articulation for she lives through it. When the subject sees another subject, she first perceives a thing that she identifies as a *körper* because it looks pretty much the same as her own *körper*. And because she has the intimate knowledge that a *körper* is necessarily intertwined with a *leib*, she *introjects* a subjectivity into the other. The other is an *alter ego*: she is another subject just like me. In the Husserlian approach to intersubjectivity, I access the other through the

commonality of our beings. Both of us are instances of a universal and transcendental structure of subjectivity. I constitute the other as another instance of this transcendental structure that unites us in a community: the community of subjects. The other is, like me, just a particular instance of humans in general. The other might differ from me through her properties, she might be the poor, a fool, etc. But those differences would be only deviations from the normative structure of subjectivity that universally defines *us*. If we were to apprehend relational aesthetics from the sole stance of Husserlian intersubjectivity, it would primarily be an aesthetic of universalism and reciprocity.

Switching from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty would not change much as it is again an ideal of commonality that Merleau-Ponty pursues (reformulating and radicalizing Husserl's views in an aesthesiological direction) with his notion of *intercorporeity* (Merleau-Ponty 2001). Indeed, the main idea behind this concept is a universal sharedness of the perceptive experience. Accessing, from my primary viewpoint, the other as another viewpoint, is the essential dynamic that leads to the constitution of a common and shared world. Not only the relationship between the subject and the other is to be said intersubjective. The world itself, as shared, is also to be described as intersubjective. In this sense, intersubjectivity is a precondition for science and politics.

And one could argue that it is often the case that art treats the members of an audience or the public as *just* a multiplicity of generic

subjects. Art approaches people in the same way as politics or science do: as a plurality of essentially interchangeable anonymous entities. As we have argued in the previous section, intersubjectivity as a way to access the other's experience is a necessary condition for relational art. None the less, it seems to us that approaching the social relationship only in terms of (Husserlian) intersubjectivity—a notion that posits the relation to the other as a relation between subjects, that is, a relation where the differences between the parties are abolished in favor of a normative transcendental structure—would limit our understanding of the relational experience, that is of the very material of relational art.

It will be our goal in the next two sections to consider alternative ways of understanding social relations: the first will focus on interaction dynamics as defined by *participatory sense-making*; the second will focus on the very *otherness of the other* as highlighted in the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas.

4. Participatory Sense-Making

The enactive approach of social cognition has provided innovative insights for understanding social interaction as a collective dynamic of sense-making. Where classical views of sociality are centered on the question of how an individual subject experiences the other and interacts with her, the Participatory Sense-Making (PSM) approach (De Jaegher and Di Paolo

2007) aims at stepping outside of the individualistic methodology to develop a systemic approach to the interaction process itself. Although this approach might not teach us anything about the first person experience of social encounters directly, it might help us distance ourselves from the classical subject-centered view. In this approach, the autonomy of the individual cognitive agent is none the less a pre-condition for the social interaction to make sense. As rooted in the enactive approach of cognition, PSM takes as a starting point the embodiment of cognition in autonomous experiencing organisms, who make sense of their *milieu* by engaging in sensori-motor sense-making interactions.

However, beyond the individualistic approach of cognition, the authors claim that when two (or more) agents meet, their individual sensori-motor dynamics entangle with one another, giving rise to an autonomous interaction level : like some kind of dance, a dance that is not directed by any individual agent but is the product of the interaction process itself. More precisely, PSM relies on the mutual influences of two sets of causalities:

- (individual) *interaction*, as the process through which the autonomous (cognitive) agent engages with its *milieu* in a sensori-motor loop in which actions influence sensations and sensations causes new actions.

- *coordination* that is the phenomenon observed whenever the dynamics of two (or more) systems sharing the same environment tend to

affect each other: for instance two pendulum clocks on a not too rigid wall would tend to synchronize (Huygens 1669).

In participatory sense-making the effects of (individual) interaction dynamics of the involved agents influence the conditions of coordination phenomena, and vice-versa, the coordination phenomenon affects the conditions of (individual) interactions. (Individual) interaction and coordination dynamics are bound in what system theorists call an *operational closure*. Although it relies on external conditions, this *operational closure* emerges and affirms itself as an autonomous dynamic system. Participatory sense-making emerges from the mutual attachment of individual enactive dynamics but then, as De Jaegher and Di Paolo put it: "interaction is not reducible to individual actions or intentions but installs a relational domain with its own properties that constrains and modulates individual behavior" (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007, p. 494). As relying on external conditions, the autonomy of the interactional level is also intrinsically unstable and precarious.

The relational domain transcends the level of individual cognition, and in particular, transcends individual will. The authors give an explicit example of this with the situation of two people walking toward each other in a narrow corridor: if there is not enough space for them to pass each other easily, they will engage in some kind of dance and it will take a little moment, during which their sensori-motor dynamics are entangled, before they succeed to actually cross their paths. This example nicely illustrates the

independence of the interaction level in regards to the individual sensori-motor dynamics which nonetheless support it.

Let us consider -as an illustration of how PSM could shed light on the interactional dynamics of participative art forms- the piece *The Gramsci Monument* by Thomas Hirschhorn, an artwork commissioned by Dia Art Foundation in 2013. The artist created the material conditions for a participative social dynamics to emerge, on the grounds of Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development in the Bronx, New York. A whirlwind of activities such as philosophy workshops, art classes, discussion groups, collective meals, construction works, etc., took place during the few weeks of this participative event. It is interesting to observe how the artist, after initiating the dynamics, avoided a top/down position retreating to the position of a simple participant among others, in order to leave space for the autonomy of each participant. Indeed, as we mentioned before, embodied autonomy of individuals is a precondition for participatory sense-making to emerge. If relational art here exhibits a social form, it is a dynamic form, a dynamic of emergence, floating somehow in an unstable and precarious way over individualities. We believe that PSM provides a convincing explanatory framework for this kind of dynamic form that is at stake in relational art. It shows sociality as irreducible to a sum of individualities. It enlightens the very notion of participation by stressing the precariousness of the autonomous dynamics of sociality. And it does not constrain individual singularity under the hard frame of universalism.

Concerning the question of experience, we consider that the PSM approach does not yet provide a solid account of first person experience of sociality. Nevertheless, it invites us to avoid reducing social experience to the experience of accessing another's subjectivity. The social experience is, so to speak, the experience of sociality itself, that is an experience of taking part in a dynamic of emergence that transcends individual engagement, an experience of being incorporated in such a dynamic (Lenay and Sebbah 2015).

5. Otherness

PSM invited us to take a first step away from (husserlian) intersubjectivity and thereby gave us new perspectives for apprehending the form and the experience induced in relational art. In this last section, last but not least, we want to question the relational experience in the light of the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas.

In this section, we will take as an illustration the performance *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramović, presented at Studio Morra (Naples, Italy) in 1974. During this performance, the artist was standing still for six hours while the audience was invited to do whatever they wanted with her body. Seventy two objects were provided for the interaction, including a rose, feather, a scalpel and a loaded gun. We consider that this performance offers a good example for Levinas' approach to the signification of the relation with the

other as it insists not on the understanding of the other's experience (empathy) nor on the emergence of a dynamically created meaning, but on the ethical asymmetry between an empowered subject and a vulnerable other.

Levinas criticizes classical phenomenological approaches (typically Husserlian or Heideggerian phenomenologies) in that, according to him, they don't give justice to the ethical experience (Levinas 1990a; 1990b): that is an experience in which the other is not reduced to an object but respected in her very alterity. For Levinas, the other is not other because she carries different constituted properties, but because she exceeds the power of constitution. When encountering objects in the dynamics of constitution, the subject dominates exteriority as she incarnates the absolute and originary locus of meaning. But encountering the other *as other* is precisely for the subject to lose her spontaneous and, so far, unquestioned primacy over her world. The body of the other expresses a signification not reducible to that which can be reached through constitution: it calls for care, for *ethics*. The Levinasian notion of *face* precisely points towards this peculiar experience of excess.

Let us refer to the paradigmatic situation of murder. For Levinas, the other is revealed as that which can be harmed or murdered, and at the same time, that which resists the possibility of murder. The command "Thou shalt not kill" is not an abstract rule that the subject might apply in a given situation. This command reveals through the very experience of

encountering the other – the revelation of this command is the very signification of this experience. The *face* of the other, through its very vulnerability, its nakedness resists the powers of the subject. The resistance of the *face* to murder is not like the opposition of a physical force: it is an ethical resistance. The alterity of the *face* introduces a new dimension of signification to the world, that is, in Levinas words, *ethics*.

Staying motionless in front of her audience, Marina Abramović is offering the possibility to treat her as a thing, as an object. She is offering the possibility of murder. But at the same time, her very presence as a person reveals a resistance against murder. And, this resistance is felt, endured, suffered by the subjects in the audience, because they are ethical subjects. With Levinas, there is something like an embodied ethical sensibility, an embodied sensibility to the presence of the other.

Let us insist on this point : ethics is not a conceptual concern but a sensitive and embodied matter. Otherness is felt in an embodied way, as a resistance, as a weight. The *proximity* of the other is suffered by the subject in her very flesh, as an embodied contestation of the egoic enjoyment of being, as a resistance against the free deployment of power. Levinas invites us to consider a specific sensibility to otherness, and thereby, an aesthetic of the proximity of the other, an aesthetic of the ethical resistance.

For the sake of explanation, we have referred here to the extreme and dramatic situation of murder. But, for Levinas, the ethical approach of subjectivity applies in everyday situations, in every genuine form of care:

like holding the door for the other for instance (so there would be room here for something like a Levinasian *everyday relational aesthetics*). Moreover, the Levinasian approach to sociality as contact with otherness is not restricted to ethics, but it also reveals through the traits of desire. Levinas provides insights that enable an approach to experiences like *eros*, love, parenthood, etc. That is all those experiences whose phenomenological description relies on a radical asymmetry between the subject and the other.

As we have seen, in Levinas' approach, the relational experience is not one of meeting the other as an alter ego, just like oneself, nor an experience of being caught up in a transcendent social dynamic, but rather the experience of encountering the other as the one I am responsible for, or the one I desire.

6. Conclusion

It has not been our goal here to give a new definition of relational art *as art*, or of art *as relational*. Our goal has been to explore the very "material" this type of art is made of. Through this exploration it appeared to us that, although necessary, the scheme of intersubjectivity was not sufficient to adequately seize the forms and experiences induced by relational art. To overcome these limitations, the PSM approach offered new insights regarding autonomous and emergent forms of sociality, and also concerning the experience of participation. More radically, the phenomenology of

otherness of Emmanuel Levinas led us to consider a specific sensibility to the other's presence, calling for an aesthetic of proximity of the other. In this view, relational art is not only defined by an egalitarian togetherness, but its very "flesh" is *proximity*, that is, responsibility for the other and desire. This primordial sensibility for otherness is possibly the very material societies are made of.

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