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Relational Thinking Methodological Challenges for Art History

Concept paper for a workshop with the research group “Art Production and Art Theory in the Age of Global Migration” (Ulmer Verein), at the DFK Paris, 23.–24.10.2025

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Relational Thinking. Methodological Challenges for Art History

For the discipline of art history, the question of relationality presents itself on various conceptual and historical levels. But it holds particular relevance in current debates concerning how, as part of the “migratory turn” (Dogramaci), we might approach a critical global art history, as well as concerning the study of ecological issues and the consequences of digitalization/algorithmization. The field is confronted not only with an abundance of ideas and discourses around relationality, but also with a number of challenges.

For all their variety – and despite their at times strong divergences from one another – these approaches are united by their critique of structuring and explaining the world through binary and representational premises, and of associated hierarchies and systems of authority. As an intellectual and political project, relational thinking can pose a productive challenge for art history: it raises the question of an ethics of research and calls for greater plurality and equity in both discourse and society. Meanwhile, the discipline must contend with the sometimes inflationary and uncritical usage of the term: indeed, despite its dialectical valence, ‘relationality’ has enjoyed a career as an uncritical buzzword.

Developed as a historical keyword in art theory and practice of the 1990s, and simultaneously pursued with vigour as a central paradigm of the humanities, relationality now encompasses a range of cultural-theoretical, anthropological, ecological, philosophical, and art- and cultural-historical discourses. These approaches – each with its own orientation – understand the biological, social, and cultural constitution of the world as explicitly relational and intertwined and, from this outlook, seek to cultivate ethically and politically informed stances. Relationality offers both a descriptive and an analytical category with which to

grasp the world as a network of dynamic relationships permeated by complex power structures.

A central thinker in today's conceptualizations of relationality is the Caribbean cultural theorist and philosopher Édouard Glissant. He describes the relational structure of the world in his *Poétique de la relation* (1990). Drawing on the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the geography of the diverse and interconnected Caribbean archipelago, he formulates a critique of a Eurocentric, essentialist, and homogeneous notion of culture and identity. For Glissant, the painful mixing brought about by forced contact produces social relations and relational identities that can be enacted as forms of resistance and emancipation. Such practices are an expression of resilience in the face of the catastrophe of exploitation and dehumanization and the loss of familiar cultures, languages, and histories. From these violent encounters emerges the cultural process of creolization, a dynamic and always unpredictable mixing of languages, cultures, and ethnicities, far removed from essentialism and purism.

Several rich points of departure for questions around relationality stem from the efforts, among French thinkers, to reflect critically on the Francophone world. Following Glissant, they highlight the country's colonial history to draw out the potential of a non-identitarian philosophy of relationality: How might a regime of hostility be replaced by an ethic of hospitality (Mondzain)? How might the universal be apprehended from the plurality of the world (Diagne)? How might we think with differences rather than denying or erasing them (Cassin)? What these lines of inquiry have in common is their centring of the question of culture: through an engagement with poetic experiences – literary, artistic, or otherwise – they forge a relational way of conceiving the world. In contrast to methods that, based on the model of economic globalization, propagate a technicist view of connectivity, the aim here is to reflect on the 'art of approach' (*l'art de l'approche*).

Beyond the Francophone world, these issues were voiced in critical terms as early as the 1980s. The Brazilian sociologist and activist Lélia Gonzalez, for example, put forward the sociological-political category of *Amefricanity*. Based on the shared experience of Black and Indigenous people on the American continent, she critically distances herself from the colonial and Eurocentric labels of Latin America and Ibero-America. Relevant here is the question of collective identity and resistance in the context of the African diaspora. Similarly, in *Creolization of Theory* (2011) the literary and cultural scholars Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet draw on Glissant's concept of creolization to consider the construction of theory with reference not just to Western traditions but to multiple places and languages. This decentralized, plural, and open understanding of creolized theory and theory formation offers a critique of Eurocentric-universalist and cultural-essentialist frameworks. Grounded on translation and relational comparison, this reconceptualization provides a methodological model with which to actuate theory and meet the realities of the world's diversity.

Even before these issues were taken up within academic art history, it was primarily contemporary art theory and practice that made concepts of relationality useful to them, namely as a catchword that has persisted to this day: relation and relationality became elevated to an art-critical and postcolonial paradigm, from Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) to the 34th São Paulo Biennale curated by Jacopo Crivelli Visconti in 2020/21, via Okwui Enwezor's documenta 11 and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Archipelago Conversations*. The near-inflationary occurrence of 'relationality' in today's art world has its downside: initially conceived as a provoking alternative to object art and as a decolonial critique of Eurocentric schools of thought, relationality has been reduced – in the wake of a questionable euphoria around globalization – to a romanticized and defused buzzword that purports to describe the artistic 'zeitgeist' of a networked, hierarchy-free world.

Therefore, in lieu of a “happy transculturalism” (Kravagna), art historians today seek all the more emphatically to turn attention to frictions, clashes, and complex power structures. Fruitful in this context is the idea of dis:connectivity (Balme/Dogramaci/Wenzlhuemer), as it emphasizes the diverse relations – generative as well as conflictual and denied – that come to bear on the global world, indeed that co-constitute the world through processes that are both dynamic and disruptive.

Decolonial conceptualizations of relationality level a critique at binary epistemologies, ontologies, and power structures; they always also take up a decidedly politicized positioning. In this regard, they often mobilize aspects of Indigenous thinking. The Latin American decolonial theorist Arturo Escobar, for example, advocates a “relational ontology,” which he conceives, proceeding from Indigenous epistemologies, as a “radical interdependence” between nature and humanity. Based on the multiplicity and entanglement of worlds and modes of world-making, he envisages a pluriversal world as a counter-model to the modern Western notion of a single universal one (Escobar).

A decidedly Indigenous perspective guides the arguments of the Bolivian sociologist, historian, and activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. In her sense of relationality, decolonization is an everyday practice as much as a discursive or academic project. For Cusicanqui, it is foremost a matter of rethinking social relations from an Indigenous, Aymaran perspective: through the juxtaposition of Indigenous and Western elements, of tradition and modernity – as components that do not dissolve into a synthesis but rather exist in irresolvable yet productive friction with one another. Taking as her point of departure a series of terms from the Aymara language that enable us to grasp things that are contradictory yet co-existent, Cusicanqui shows that ethical stances and creative resistance develop not in spite of colonial ruptures but rather from the very recognition of such ruptures.

Questions of relationality also play a central role in the environmental humanities, which explore the interactions between humans and the environment, cultural perceptions of nature and culture, and the social, ethical, and political dimensions of ecological crises. In *Relationality: An Emergent Politics of Life Beyond the Human* (2024), which stands at the intersection of decolonial theory and the environmental humanities, Arturo Escobar, Michal Osterweil, and Kriti Sharma analyse the way in which dualistic views of nature and culture, or subject and object, contribute to current ecological and social crises by fostering alienated and exploitative orientations to the environment. They propose relationality – i.e., the insight that everything is interconnected – as an alternative perspective with the potential to render ecosystems and societies juster and more sustainable. Working with a notion of the world as pluriversal and as constituted of multiple worldviews, the authors put forward concrete suggestions for how relationality could be implemented in politics, design, and social movements, namely through transformative practices based on cooperation and respect.

To question the traditional separation between nature and culture and expose the relational interdependence between humans and the environment, the environmental humanities have looked to the theory of agential realism developed by the feminist physicist and philosopher Karen Barad. Barad's conceptual framework assumes an intra-actional world: a world structure in which things, humans, nature, and knowledge do not stand independently of one another but only in relation, and in which everything exists in a continuous process of co-emergence.

Within the environmental humanities, issues of relationality also lend themselves to the voicing of ethical considerations, such as how – in the ruins of capitalism (Tsing), and despite the ongoing colonization and exploitation of the earth and its

living beings – trust in a relational constitution and interpretation of the world might be upheld and defended (Rose).

The art historian Claire Farago draws productive connections between art history and the environmental humanities in her new book, *Writing Borderless Histories of Art: Human Exceptionalism and the Climate Crisis* (2025). With a lens that is interdisciplinary as well as historiographically and transculturally critical, she demonstrates the interdependence among naturalized European conceptualizations of “human exceptionalism,” “the binary between human and nature,” “art,” “human,” “race,” and “climate theory” and how these constructs shape not only the conventional practice of art history but, more broadly, our relationship to the world and to one another. Farago argues that, amid current ecological, humanitarian, and political crises, it is essential that we adopt a notion of interconnection to reconceptualize the ties that exist between humankind and nature as well as within and among humankind. As producers of knowledge, she writes, it is our ethical responsibility to recognize the implications knowledge holds politically and in terms of shaping our societies. Accordingly, her starting question is: “What if an understanding of connectivity, rather than human exceptionalism, were taught as part of a general education curriculum in the humanities?”

The art historian Monica Juneja likewise centres relationality and connectivity in her book *Can Art History Be Made Global? Mediations from the Periphery* (2023). To address the methodological challenges associated with an interpretation of the world as relationally intertwined, she develops a transcultural practice of art history. Rather than attributing stability to the given units of spatial, temporal, or conceptual investigation, Juneja’s transcultural approach questions and deconstructs universalized art-historical taxonomies, values, and hierarchies,

seeing these analytical tools as in flux, as “continually defined as participants in and as contingent upon the historical relationships in which they are implicated.” For Juneja, it bears asking how globality can be conceived without being reduced to the processes and effects of global capitalism. She avoids this pitfall by turning a critical eye to the diverse, enmeshed, and fraught relations that constitute the ‘global’ – foregrounding the various actors and their agency. Because her lens is that of transcultural ontology – i.e., an understanding of culture as a process, as “radically made and remade: in processes of interaction” – Juneja equates transcultural art history with epistemic critique and distinguishes herself from a cross-cultural approach restricted to tracing contacts and exchanges between cultures. In order to explore ostensibly ‘peripheral’ strains of thought and their histories from a transcultural perspective, one must engage with epistemological premises and methods in a self-reflexive manner. Whereas places outside of the Western-influenced ‘mainstream’ have conventionally been treated only in region- or area-specific studies, the objective of a transcultural art history is to examine the artistic practices and modes of thought of these places as equal counterparts to those of the West and, on this footing, to set them into transcultural contexts. This reframing opens up new spaces for reflection and thought, including about – and toward the transformation of – disciplinary structures that have hitherto prevented art history’s reform into a relational, pluriversal, and critically global field. As Juneja writes, the transcultural opening-up and theorization of ‘peripheral’ art offers the potential to break down conceptual and institutional divisions and hierarchies between Western and non-Western art and, in their place, to inaugurate relational and transcultural frameworks of meaning.

Although the approaches mentioned here demonstrate great diversity in terms of their emphases and contexts, they share a commitment to dialectics and ethics in their critique of binary, dogmatic, universalized systems of thought. This is not only a matter of considering the specific socio-political contexts of other regions,

but also, and above all, of examining one's own thinking and positionality in order to become conscious of presuppositions and conventions of thought. Being-in-relation means putting decolonial critique to the test as a form of productive interference, rather than merely applying it as a purely theoretical system of thought: it is in this sense, namely of "speaking one's own language like a foreign language," that Mondzain describes one of the most radical paths to decolonizing one's mental landscape.

When it comes to inquiry into history and historicity as well, a critical examination of questions around relational identity again opens a path to methodological self-awareness. In contrast to the ahistorical inclinations of the avant-garde, which ultimately fall prey to an amelioristic, teleological view of history, relational approaches undertake not a confrontational correction of earlier stances but rather their critical contextualization. It is crucial to avoid any essentialization of the here and now, namely by cultivating an awareness of one's own positionality. 'Relation' emerges not merely as the antithesis of autonomy, purism, and transparency, but also, and foremost, as an intellectual symptom of a worldview that exceeds definition in terms of origin stories, inquiring instead into the many relational histories yet to be told.

In this regard, it is necessary to locate art history in a transcultural context, to confront it with a poetics of multiplicity that touches on key methods (historiography, comparison, translation) and the fundamentals of research (originality, autonomy, identity, likeness and difference, memory, influence, materiality, etc.). Such shifts in perspective invite us to explore the potential of relational practice in art, teaching, and research; to test ephemeral, collective-participatory formats; to question modes of subjectivity; and to critically examine prevailing responses. As for the (concrete) analysis of works of art, the relational network of production–participation–reception–XYZ could be set into more

explicit interplay with the positionalities of the researchers themselves (in Barad's sense). In this way, interpretive authority could be questioned. While artistic practice has always been understood as a modality of experiencing the world, the positionality and relationality of the figure of the artist-subject, in its various entanglements, has only recently received more focused attention. Thus, rather than tethering artistic research to the artist alone, processes of artistic research and production come to be understood more expansively as a collaboration among artists and other actors: viewers, research objects (in the sense of the social life of objects), (working) materials, cross-species science (Braidotti, Latour), etc. Relationality therefore represents a productive challenge in theory and practice. For art history, it opens up important methodological questions, perhaps even contradictions – which we would like to discuss together!

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