

Author Simon O'Sullivan

Source *NJP Reader #1 Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology*, pp.52-55

Publisher Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin

Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: Simon O'Sullivan

Colophon

Editor Youngchul Lee, Henk Slager

Translation Ji-Young Yoo, Soojung Park,
Wonhwa Yoon

Final Editing Annette W. Balkema

Designer TEXT (Jin Jung, Han Jeong Hoon)

Published on 2010

Simon O'Sullivan

Simon O'Sullivan explores Guattari's notion of 'the production of subjectivity'. A Senior Lecturer in Art History/Visual Culture at Goldsmiths College in London, O'Sullivan writes and teaches on various contemporary art practices and on art theory in general. Additionally he has a collaborative art practice with David Burrows, under the name *Plastique Fantastique*.

1

Artistic anthropology intends to produce novel models of relationality and connectivity. Could (Nam June Paik's legacy as a form of) artistic anthropology contribute to an artistic discourse going beyond the framework of "relational aesthetics"? Who are the artists in our day developing relevant examples of rethinking and recontextualizing an artistic anthropology?

A typical critique, increasingly made, of Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics is that it substitutes a general model of "conviviality" for any criticality, or, more specifically, forms of dissent. My take on this (following Jean-Francois Lyotard) is that such dissent – which critiques of relational aesthetics take as the very *modus operandi* of a radical contemporary art practice - can be caught by the very thing they dissent from. They are forced to operate on the same terrain as their "enemy" and, as such, these forms of dissent can merely reproduce more of the same albeit dressed up as opposition.

A different take on Bourriaud might be to accelerate his concepts. For example, to articulate, following Spinoza, a kind of *super-conviviality* that is do with productive joyful encounters that occur when two or more things come together in a relationship of general agreement (this could be an art practice and participant, a collaboration, etc.). This is not to foreground a liberal ideology of consensus - Spinoza's "joy" is not "happiness" in the sense of an individual ego-state or set of values - but it is to choose affirmation over negation and to understand the former as the basic building blocks for an ethical life and a political ontology - this being

the argument of Spinoza's *Ethics* and his other more political writings. In passing, it is worth noting that Félix Guattari's ecosophic paradigm, especially as it is mapped out in his future-orientated book, *Chaosmosis*, has much in common with Spinoza's *Ethics* in that it moves precisely towards this expanded chemistry of subjectivity. "Artistic anthropology" as a name for "novel models" for thinking art practice would do well to attend to this more molecular "relationality and connectivity", or what we might call simply a register of becoming. This is an ethico-aesthetic model for life as well as art – and for "life as a work of art" (as both Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze portrayed it). Another name for this, following Deleuze and Guattari, is schizoanalysis. Without doubt such practices are occurring all around us; equally without doubt the majority are invisible to an art world and market that trades on atomized and competitive individualism – however, this might be dressed up as "relational", "participatory", and so forth.

2

What could artistic anthropology mean for a current artistic practice? How could it relate to medium-specific qualities? Is it a form of artistic communication defined by a postmedium-condition? Or is it a practice that demands the concept of medium-specificity to change?

If "artistic anthropology" were to be understood in the terms laid out above then, to repeat the point above, life itself would become an art – or more generally an aesthetic practice. This is not, however, to deny other medium-specific practices which might well also be involved in this register of becoming (and this medium specificity will always take place in a "post-medium condition" that is today the general condition of art practice – a post-Duchampian condition we might say). A third point here is to affirm those practices that aspire to a kind of "total art" – following Olaf Fahlstrom's term. Installation, and more particularly Performance, in its deployment of alternative and often non-sensical "narratives", in its various technologies of bodily transformation and experimentation, and in

its more general exploration of different spaces and places, but also different **times** – especially of the event – would be such a practice of what we might call post-medium medium specificity - i.e. an expanded practice that moves towards the condition of life in general **but remains** art. It is perhaps worth remarking here that such practices are not to do with “communication”, or at least such communication is not their sole aim. Indeed, there is never anything, ultimately, to “understand” with such practices - nothing to “read” as it were. Often they operate on a register of affect, or intensity, that operates parallel to, but also interferes with more dominant coding and signifying systems - although this is not to elide the very real power art has in producing alternative signifying systems; this being art’s mythopoetic character. Is this collapsing of art into life anything more than a reassertion of the Modern claim that terminated with the Situationists? Perhaps one might think of it as working the other way around – of life collapsing into art – especially in the foregrounding of a general aesthetics of existence.

3

What could artistic anthropology - as a form of knowledge production - mean for the current classification system? Will it challenge the dominant paradigms of the established humanities and sciences? What type of new models might this trigger? How can artistic anthropology contribute to a better and more political understanding of the “human condition”? And what could artistic anthropology mean for the concept of art in general?

If “artistic anthropology” becomes just another form of “knowledge production” then it does, strictly speaking, nothing - except adding another category or classification for art, another marketing strategy. Art, when it truly is art, interrupts or literally ruptures this kind of knowledge. Indeed, it stymies our desire for knowledge - when this is understood as a desire for that which reassures ourselves of our subjectivity as it is already in place. This is why art can be bothersome, irritating, positioned as “irrelevant” and so forth. Art is,

we might say, ontologically **difficult** orientated as it is related to that which is yet to come. It is also why art's "uselessness" is so important, allowing it to operate away from typical circuits of information and exchange - ideally at any rate. Art's productivity comes from this specifically **non**-productive character. If "artistic anthropology" aspires to this more radical operation then it contributes more to a "post-human" condition than a human one - where "human" is always already defined and captured in a series of discursive and signifying formations (and a market) that thwarts creativity and experimentation. We might say then that art has at least two orientations. First, the "triggering of new models", when these are not just more of the same, i.e. previous models that have merely been tweaked - and such new models, as suggested in my first answer above, might be taken from philosophers such as Spinoza and Guattari, both of whom have yet to have a sustained impact on the expanded field of contemporary art theory. And second, the breaking of models - and indeed the desire for **modeling** when the latter is also a desire for capture and classification - and for curating and careers. This is to suggest that art creates a world and breaks a world, and that these two always come together. Crucial here, however, is what one might call a general intention - or what Deleuze, following Nietzsche, called one's style of life: whether one is drawn to affirmation or to negation. It seems to me that Nam June Paik's practice was always led by affirmation, even joy - even when this resulted in dissent or refusal - and, as such, is amenable to "artistic anthropology" as I have attempted to articulate - or re-articulate - in my three responses to the questionnaire.