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Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: Ricardo Basbaum

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It is absolutely clear that after modernism, anthropology has replaced history as the main guideline for the transformations on art practice. To search for the new has no longer a historical quality - the foundation of a new time - but an anthropological aspect - the investigation of the limits of how the "human" can be constructed or where it can be located in relation to the borderlines of man/machine, man/animal, and nature/culture. The last fifty years have seen several gestures of reinvention of the human being and its particular features – interiority, sensoriality, cultural singularity, symbolic system, ritualization, etc. – in the sense of exploring the limits of what has been known or taken as convention, consequently acknowledging that these edges should be negotiated according to different living conditions and cultural moments.

Therefore, it is correct to state that any relational and connective model experienced at a certain moment was produced somehow through collective processes including art works as main objects of such dynamics. Obviously, if the limits of the art field are enacted by its actors, the art practice is one of the main collective gestures to mobilize the outside of culture and its symbolic systems pointing precisely to what is still to be achieved. Where art production exists and takes place, a layer of formation is always triggered and stands there for the invention of the "human". But it is also clear that such investigation encounters more and more hybrid forms and that recent developments show an increasing number of models built as a mix of topics that were kept apart before. At the 21st century, the limits of human/nonhuman, man/machine, human/animal are quite blurred and this can be taken as an important symptom of



Ricardo Basbaum
Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?, work in progress since 1994. Painted steel object, experience. Participation Lenir de Miranda, Pelotas, Brazil, 2009. Mercosul Biennale
Photo by participant
Courtesy of the artist



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Photo by Cintia Langie
Courtesy of the artist

the current state of knowledge. Today, the anthropological membranes (taking for granted that we are using a former discipline as a means for getting in contact with experience) are one of the frontiers where we have been experimenting with **who we are**, and **what we want to be**.

The practice of a relational aesthetics has been a condition for contemporary art since the late 1950s. The recent trend of relational aesthetics only reveals a specific moment where relationality can be played in terms of a complete conceptual autonomy open to any sort of structure or event which can then be enacted as an insider to the art arena. Bourriaud's concept, however, is too limited in the sense that it has not taken into consideration the work of artists such as Allan Kaprow, Hélio Oiticica, and Lygia Clark – especially when it is known that the latter has developed an entire body of work directly conceived on relationality. Thus a much more careful and political approach needs to be considered; one that would devise the several different territories of the relational game avoiding the current generational generalization. If we are to consider the possibilities of an “artistic anthropology”, then the most interesting would be to search for its “transversality” (Guattari), in the sense of encountering the region where art and anthropology can interchange without hierarchy or excessive generalization and simplification. Nevertheless, maybe a stable encounter as such would be impossible – only a dynamic situation can be reached, one where we are captured as part of its plot, actors or agents engaged in the transformation we devise.

Such a field in-between art and anthropology – an area where art contributes to redesign the contact zones between the “human” and its outside – could never be specifically medium-related. Any means of practice can be considered a form of action. The decision to either function as an artwork or not does not unfold from medium-specificity. Rather it would derive from a condition of “conceptual autonomy” (Michael Lingner), in the sense that today any artwork performs a complex statement about its nature as an art project, both as an autonomous entity and in relation to a circuit, network or cultural and political environment. Such “double-work” or transversal condition (or extra-disciplinary, according to Brian Holmes) is beyond medium specificity and

requires an awareness of the flexibility of the art concept. A concept that does change globally and culturally and should be performed again at each new gesture; it can no longer naively be taken for granted.

Art can be considered a *new* achievement (object and process) in the cultural development of mankind. Only in the last 250 years has it been discussed under a conceptual basis and a referential discourse. Before that, it was carried without any specific place, being bounced from the ritual and magic to the purely religious and sometimes communicational – positions which lack a more proper mediation as “fugue”, and therefore the more precise lines of flight were encountered under its condition as “art”. Art has – fortunately – continuously meant something plural, which escapes any fixed and static definition (i.e. a political condition). An “artistic anthropology” makes sense as a methodological device to examine art practice in the global arena - and the “Global Art and the Museum” project by Hans Belting and Peter Weibel is quite significant here - although it will always require a further negotiation among all the actors involved (artists, curators, critics, historians, audiences, institutions, and so on) to get through any specific and detailed art discourse and achievement. But what apparently seems to be a gesture backwards or a withdrawal is in fact a leap into the present and towards the future. There is an urge to rescale practices involving contact and affection (which account for the “body”) into the speediness of the new communicational connectivity and into the complexity of the various cultural games. Obviously, the horizon of a “knowledge production” is to be maintained as well as art’s features towards the continuous redesign of its lines in terms of confrontation, political dialogism and freedom of expression. In line with its tradition, the art field has always been an area where closure and locked ideas continuously find the counter-exercise of otherness.



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work in progress since 1994.
Painted steel object, experience.
Participation Grupo
de Pesquisa Políticas
do Sensível no Corpo Docente,
Pelotas, Brazil, 2009.
Mercosul Biennale
Photo by participant
Courtesy of the artist