

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Inclusions: Aesthetics of the Capitalocene*, trans. Denyse Beaulieu (London: Sternberg Press, 2023); 144 pp; paperback; ISBN: 9783956795862; paperback; RRP: 20 euros.

In *Inclusions: Aesthetics of the Capitalocene*, the French art critic, theoretician, and curator Nicolas Bourriaud builds upon themes and ideas that have driven his prior work, to propose an aesthetics that can address questions demanded by the emergent/current/contemporary/now. More specifically, this would be an “*inclusive aesthetics* that calls for a training of the gaze, *decentered* at last, relocated finally within a plurivocal universe that includes nonhumans” (p. 11). His proposition is based on the incorporation of anthropological thinking into that of the artistic, namely to undermine the very nature/culture dichotomy or binary that sets the human against the not, and which he believes serves as the ideological foundation of Western and capitalist civilization. In so doing, Bourriaud aims to reintegrate art as an essential force in giving life meaning.

According to Bourriaud, thinking through and attempting to understand contemporary phenomena like the “climate crisis” and the collapsing of distance - in its various forms - due to technology, requires/incites a profound paradigm shift in the relationship between human beings, and anything and everything else. Much how his compatriot, the social scientist Bruno Latour, defined modernity as resting on a nature/culture dichotomy, Bourriaud defines what he calls the “capitalocene,” an anthropocene that more urgently alerts of humanity’s “disastrous hegemony,” as resting on a human-centric *Weltanschauung* (p. 18). Pointing to anthropology as a reservoir of thought from which to either escape from, change, or replace this worldview, Bourriaud proffers the concept of “totemism” as a starting point, “the central idea of [which] is the existence of a connection, of a dynamic co-naturality, between human beings and their milieu” (p. 8). Thusly, anthropology could complement art and its practice, the artist, as presented by Bourriaud, “a figure of exception in the capitalist world...an inventor of strategies of resistance to the productive sphere...a resistance fighter against the domination of the labor theory of value” (p. 9).

Bourriaud devotes Chapter 1 of *Inclusions*, “The Work of Art in the Age of Global Warming” to laying down the contextual conditions at-large for, or within which, what he eventually proposes. He cites the 1884 establishment of an international standard for time, called the Greenwich Mean Time, since which “humans have been subjected to the standardization of their pace of life,” and the culture of “Fordism,” identified in the early twentieth century, which rationalized space and time, as part of the program of “industrial capitalism” (pp. 18-19). He likewise identifies this program’s belief and aim in and for infinite growth, including, perhaps most crucially, economic. Under the regimen of industrial capitalism, with the crucial assistance of an unrelenting press for technological advancement, Bourriaud relates, time, as well as other kinds of distances, have collapsed.

As a result, the unprecedented density that has been, and is being, produced has for its part facilitated, articulated a new cosmivision, where “the inhabitants of the globalized world have now been cornered into renegotiating the terms of their presence on the planet not only with all living beings, but also with their own technological creatures,” indeed “with all the forces with which we cohabit” (pp. 20-21). Bourriaud continues, “Humans and nonhumans are brought together at last under the disastrous aegis of the Anthropocene, this time as subordinates, mere materials subjected to a technoeconomic apparatus that is the true master of the universe-the ideology of profit (‘value’ and ‘growth’) have become the true subject of history” (p. 36). Bourriaud sets, or exposes, art in opposition to growth, as this program’s central tenet, in a variety of ways. Art, he argues, does not serve growth, as per French philosopher Georges Bataille’s concept of the ‘accursed share,’ or excess/surplus energy, thusly, it can be deemed useless, as not useful. Bourriaud also points to a trend in

contemporary art wherein practitioners “conduct” rather than “produce,” using or re-using what is already there (pp. 47-48). It is in thinking of the practice of art-making as conduction, rather than production, that likewise serves to articulate the required re-thinking of the relationship between human and nonhuman, living and non, subject and object, and so on.

In Chapter 2, “Toward Inclusive Aesthetics,” Bourriaud draws out what such an “inclusive aesthetics” might look like. He points to the works of British artist Mark Leckey and French artist Pierre Huyghe for examples, as both break down the “subject-object relationship,” or in artistic terms, “the relationship between the beholder and the artwork” (p. 54). Leckey and Huyghe are part of a larger movement in art, Bourriaud explains, that has ensued from as well as reflects a larger concurrent “systematic critique of the concept of the center” that has been ongoing since the 1960s, how Bourriaud summarily defines “contemporary thought” (p. 54). More precisely, Bourriaud finds fault with “the center” as the “absolute foil” of contemporary thought, as it belies an “unconscious will to maintain the existence of this central zone, while filling it with negative values.” For what is this center, ultimately, if not, surely, the “human subject”? Therefore, more recent developments in human thought indicate a turn to things, seeking out a new equilibrium, an “object-oriented thought, for which human beings and animals, plants, or products should all be treated on an equal footing” (pp. 55). He cites the search for “an object for-itself that isn’t an object for the gaze of a subject, representation, or a cultural discourse...” Indeed, if objects are all equal, it means no one of them can be considered as created by another, even if that other is the “subject or culture” (p. 56).

Thusly, in Leckey’s 2013 meta-exhibition, “The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things,” which consists of an array of objects hailing from vastly different places, times and contexts, wholly referring “to a concept used in computer science, according to which a network of objects could communicate without the intervention of a sentient agent...techno-animism,” the artist “endeavors to approach objects outside of any human mediation...to better connect with them[?]” (pp. 53-54). For his part, Huyghe’s work regularly features biological elements or aspects, which contribute an “unpredictable or accidental dimension” to his exhibitions and suggest a “world without humans.” Huyghe claims he would rather “exhibit someone to something” through his work, which Bourriaud interprets as overturning “the conventions that bind the artist and the beholder, human consciousness and its objects,” wherein the beholder is rendered as active witness (p. 53). Huyghe’s witness, however, is not charged with accounting for an object, but to be exposed to an experience, all of this fitting with/in the context/consideration that “since art is not a category of objects, but a specific regime of the human gaze, its existence is inseparable from the presence of the ‘active witness’...It only exists because the human being uses it, and invents, and classifies, and conserves, and values a class of objects that correspond to this use” (pp. 57-58).

In further drawing out a vision of ‘inclusive aesthetics’ in Chapter 2, Bourriaud offers up a selective genealogy for what could be called ‘object-oriented thought,’ among other names. He cites from Structuralism’s considerations for and then attention to non-human things, elements in any given environment, as fit for analysis, and treats with Eduardo Kohn’s text *How Forests Think* (2013) as a launchpad from which to further explore the dissolution of the traditional human subject into that of a composite, including and amongst non-human things, with reference to other sources. Such a definition, of course, relates to ideas of hybrids, networks, assemblages, and more of the like. Kohn’s interpretation, it should be noted, comes from fieldwork undertaken amongst the Runa, Amazonian Quechua-speakers living in Ecuador, *Runa* meaning ‘people’ in the language. Bourriaud devotes the remainder of the chapter to a discussion of a proposed relationship and/or affinities between art, specifically contemporary art, and magic, specifically as practiced in shamanism.

Towards these ends, Bourriaud incorporates an anthropological lens in order to turn

away from the human gaze, and to go beyond a consideration of art as some form of surplus or excess, or luxury (p. 96). He subsequently notes said affinities between art and primitivism, or any forms of what could be deemed irrational, arriving at magic. In a thought-provoking short passage, he states: “Magic...and art...[facilitate] access to systems of references that allow [human beings] to integrate the contradictions and enigmas of the world in which they are immersed” (p. 103). Is it that the practice of contemporary art could be thought of, then, as a kind of workshop or laboratory for the world, reality, where any and all things forgotten, useless, or indeed, useful, could be explored without the demands of necessarily being put to use? Bourriaud describes the work of the artist much in the same way as that of a shaman, employing from different sources what is available around them, producing combinations, bricolages (p. 111). The nature of this work, or practice, Bourriaud likens to the word-term of immersion. He describes both Leckey and Huyghe, consequently, as “artists of *immersion* in the world” (p. 54). He furthermore states “the evolution of mentalities encapsulated by the term Anthropocene concerns the position of the artist in the world as the demarcation between mankind and its environment becomes increasingly blurry, and as a purely instrumental relation to nature yields to a harrowing feeling of *immersion* in a perishable sphere...The aesthetic regime of the Capitalocene could be summed up by the feeling of immersion in the world...” (pp. 83, 93).

In the third and final chapter of *Inclusions*, “The Artist as Molecular Anthropologist,” Bourriaud builds upon what he has related prior, namely the turn to things or objects, by asking the reader to consider the artist as an anthropologist, positing from a variety of sources to support the affinity, and furthermore defines the contemporary artist of the Anthropocene as being concerned and working with the micro-scale or molecular. Bourriaud argues what art and anthropology have in common, as enterprises, practices, is an engagement with the ‘other.’ However, the Capitalocene has spurred a fundamental change in this very engagement, calling into question the traditionally assumed distance with whatever that ‘other’ was or is (p. 115). Hence the de-centering of the human subject and gaze, the flattening of any hierarchy between living and non-living things, the breaking down of the dichotomy between nature and culture, towards what Bourriaud cited as French social scientist Bruno Latour’s “parliament of things,” or the like. Bourriaud explicates: “When it emerged in the late nineteenth century, anthropology marked the decentering of the human being, who went from being the *subject of knowledge* to being an *object of study*, like nature...the Western researcher became less and less of an *omniscient subject*, turning into an object among others in an ever-broadening landscape” (p. 124). It is at this point that Bourriaud explains the “molecular turn” amongst artists, now concerned with “the major role the microscopic and the invisible play” in the contemporary Anthropocene (p. 126). Indeed, he relates “a new generation of artists who emerged in the 2010s set out to perceive the world at this level of reality. Rather than focusing on objects, things, or products, they observe the molecular structure of social realities, the atomic relations that compose the illusory stability of the world” (Pg. 127). And the human figure itself is not invulnerable to this molecularization, rendered dissolved and revealing connective components (p 133).

Bourriaud’s *Inclusions* is essentially a treatise proposing an aesthetics to meet the perhaps theoretical demands of the urgent now, that is, the Anthropocene-Capitalocene era of globalization and climate change/global warming which render the human center of traditional worldviews vulnerable. His major concern is with formulating a new theory of art, by incorporating from anthropology’s history, its theories, methodologies, and practices. In this new theory, the human subject, as a core conceptual component of outdated, deficient philosophy, is exploded. Its position as a center is dislodged, as is its placement on top of a hierarchy above anything non-human or non-living, subsequently, its gaze is decentered, furthermore, its separation from nature, as culture, is bridged. As well, not only is the human

subject proposed to become equal amongst other subjects and objects, but it is also shattered, and its parts likewise set amongst those subjects and objects. When this ‘immersion’ happens, Bourriaud promises, art can begin to take its place as an essential, meaningful force in our lives.

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