Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: David Zerbib

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NAM JUNE PAIK ART CENTER
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What concept of artistic anthropology calls for reflection in this context? Claude Lévi-Strauss defined anthropology as a "comprehensive knowledge of mankind, encompassing subjects in all historic and geographic scopes; aspiring for a knowledge that can be applied to all human development." [1] Such science of course appropriates the object "art" to develop, through anthropology of art, learning especially on the fundamental forms of representations relating to given cultures and techniques. But "art" of anthropology does not consist merely of its conceivable object. In fact, like all science, anthropology cannot be limited to a mere combination of rigorous epistemology and purely rationally defined methodology. Paul Feyerabend points it out through the "anarchist" dimensions of the "hardest" sciences: all science is partly "artistic" and during its evolution makes use of aesthetic processes and integrates sensible facts not directly related to a rational optimization of cognitive resources. [2] Thus, from object art turns into the quality of science. Human sciences a fortiori is no exception. We know in this respect how much photography accompanied and conditioned the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, how much his anthropology articulates sensibility and knowledge.

The opposite has also been the case. Art displaying cognitive potential, using rational methods, implementing experimental protocols, and continuously producing knowledge brought into play by experience, often maintaining close relations with science. All the more when it concerns a science such as anthropology, a study of mankind likely to be nourished by art, the latter activity has been dealt with especially in romanticism, as the highest achievement of the essence of mankind. But

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Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1958,
Anthropologie structurale,
Paris: Plon. (author's translation).

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Cf. Paul Feyerabend, 2003,
La science en tant qu'art,
Paris: Albin Michel.

we can also reflect on how the Renaissance linked the construction of mankind to the creation of artistic forms. As mentioned in Alberti's work published in 1485, "On the art of building" is inseparable from building mankind itself. [3] Likewise, the project of building a new humanity within artistic modernity is also the concern of an artistic anthropology. Here, knowledge about mankind deals less with the understandability of "all human development" of the past than with the establishment of future conditions to be developed as part of the progress that this renewal makes possible.

Thus, art has an anthropological nature. If we stick to this idea, it seems difficult to attribute to an artist in particular the specificity of an "anthropology from an artistic point of view" - to paraphrase Kant and his anthropology from a pragmatic point of view - since art would appear like a permanent place of anthropology in a sense of questioning the act of what humans do and how they build or construct themselves in and by art. Different parameters need to be defined from this global point of view, and it is from the variations of these parameters that the specificity of an artistic positioning can be understood. It is also in this framework that we can imagine the impossibility of a "global knowledge" about humankind. But such an impossibility still brings out a sense of anthropology, namely impossible anthropology, impossibility remaining despite all, a limit, anthropological question.

Four parameters: representational, conceptual, performantial, technical.

We can distinguish four parameters in which we can identify pragmatic parameters of artworks in general, focused here on the axis of anthropological questions. That means that we postulate the relevance - for art as well as for anthropology - of an inscription of art, including modern and contemporary art, in a certain logic of human development, which would establish a transhistoric link between, for instance, Paleolithic rock painting and abstract expressionism, or the gestures of a Korean shaman and a performance in a shopping mall at the heart of an European city. [4]

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"Some claimed that water and fire were at the source of the development of human societies. As for me, considering the utility and necessity of the roof and the wall, I would persuade myself that they played a much more important role to make men closer to one another and keep them united". Léon Battista Alberti, 2004, *L'art d'édifier*, transl. Pierre Cay and Francoise Choa, p. 48, (author's translation).

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The example of the Korean shaman is suggested here, with regard to the relationship between theater and anthropology. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

The first of the parameters would involve the image of human beings projected in or by artistic activity. It is about the human figure to be perceived in art, with its significant formal characteristics and its iconological and symbolic functioning. We could refer to this as the representational parameter.

The second parameter is about ideas and conceptions of human beings and their more or less explicit and formalized development used, conveyed or produced by artistic activity. These anthropological concepts coexist particularly with other philosophical and political ones. This could be called the conceptual parameter.

The third parameter implies the activity - whatever it may be and whatever the medium - that presumes execution and manifestation, ritual and spectacle while bringing into play sensible and symbolic contexts, the position of artists and those addressed, raising questions about the culture and community artists are integrated in. This could be said to be the performantial parameter. [5]

The fourth parameter is called the technical parameter. The first three dimensions would not be efficient nor effective without implementing techniques, mediums or instruments whose nature defines forms of reason, relations with time and space; without introducing materials in which the human figure is cast, an idea of mankind and human is constructed, erased, transformed, transcended, pluralized, and reconstructed.

Deconstruction of technology, reconstruction of anthropology

Among the numerous examples that need to be elaborated to study the functioning of these parameters in artistic anthropology, Nam June Paik's work could serve as a starting point. I would like to briefly point out a few elements at the heart of the connections of Paik's anthropological and artistic "syntheses", creating a machine, just like the *Paik-Abe Synthesizer* produces new figures and gestures of humanization. [6]

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Performantial rather than performative: in order to emphasize practical and sensible sides of performance in play and not exclusively bringing these dimensions to the effects of performativity of symbolic and linguistic nature.

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Some of these leads were developed in our contribution to the catalog *The Gift of Nam June Paik 2*: "Paik and the humanization of technology: the other logos of tekhnè".

Paik's artistic anthropology relates to the project of "humanizing technology". There we can observe one of the essential conceptual parameters of this procedure: the idea of human technology. Body-machine, sex-musical instrument connections, image-voice interactions, hybridization, incorporation, allegorization, technological anthropomorphism (robots)… These are the operations realized based on the central concept of human technology. However, that concept would only be a chimerical illustration if, at a deep level, the technology did not become the place of overcoming the clash between *physis* and *tekhnè*, between nature and technical, between physical movement and techno-artistic dynamic. The connection TV/ Garden (*TV Garden*, 1974) literally exemplifies that clash. The flow of electrons, especially inside a cathode-ray tube, becomes a means of overcoming such clashes. Another work, *Moon is the oldest TV*, (1965) manipulates the video signal producing on the screen some spherical luminous forms with varying dimensions, allowing a materializing evolution of a lunar cycle without image capture.

The technical or technological parameter is fundamental in Paik's work. Obviously, when we talk about medium, it is about the means as well as the environment of the work. As such, the concept of human technology is actually connected to the concept of technological humanity. This concept presumes that there is no man without technique. If Aristotle claims that man is an animal gifted with logos, the rational speech, Paik's works shows man as a technological animal, i.e. an animal whose tools and instruments are languages; in that sense technique is consubstantial with reason. Also man is an animal whose very natural surrounding is a medium, i.e. a means of symbolization and a symbolical environment.

The image of mankind shown by Paik in his sculptures, installations, videos or performances is that of a humanity divided between, on the one hand, contemplation of a new infinite cyclic but immanent time, mediatized and technologically secularized (lunar cyclical time or television stanza of Buddha); and on the other hand, permanent rupture of flow of images of culture (*Global Groove*). As a consequence, face and figures of subjectivity are unstable, since they depend on the choice of handling, of connections and of magnetic fields

Nam June Paik
Hand and Face, 1961(still images).
Nam June Paik Art Center Collection

in the work at that given moment. The representational parameter is anthropologically contradicting. The human figure does not have a mimetic value, or a realistic imitation. The figures are the result of technological manipulations, which inscribe in the mimetic process a random and free access, i.e. the principle of *random access*. In this sense, the representational parameter always refers to activity, gestures, dynamics and forces of images. In other words, to the performantial parameter of an artistic anthropology. Of course, there are performances by Paik, filled with references to, for example, Korean traditional clothes. But the anthropological value of Paik's performances exceeds these explicit significations of religious rituals. The handling of magnets, the gestural mask of *Hand and Face*, the distortions, intentional dysfunctions, short circuits and effect of saturation, reversals, coverings and the hybridizations are all so many movements and gestures easily assimilated within a process of alteration.

Alteration, a principle Georges Bataille in particular identified as the source of all representation, obtains an immanent meaning in Paik's work. [7] In Paik, alteration, the fundamental performantial parameter, inscribes the art practice at the heart of an anthropological project. Against the background of a technological development a 20th-century philosophy identified as a threat for the development and progress of humankind, Paik deconstructs technology - which would imply the reevaluation of the logo-centrism of our conception of technology - in order to impose the artistic conditions of an anthropological reconstruction.

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George's Bataille's theory of alteration is developed in his review of G.H. Luquet *L'art primitif* in *Documents*, II, no. 7 (1930), collected in *Oeuvres complêtes*, Volume I, (1970), Paris: Gallimard, pp. 389-397. Cf. David Zerbib, "Paik and the humanization of technology: the other logos of tekhnè" in *Gesture and Speech* (1993), Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press.