



WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Stories, Sounds and Sentiments – Exploring ‚Relational Aesthetics‘ of Social Worlds

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Abstract: With the turn towards approaches labelled as ‚more-than-human‘, ‚relational‘ or ‚new-materialist‘, anthropology’s attention is shifting anew towards those forces in the world that transcend but often affect human agency. This allows a fresh perspective on social worlds, that can be aligned with certain conceptions of the aesthetic. As such, aesthetics can be a window onto those dimensions of social life that escape a one-sided abstracting and rationalizing view of social processes and provide insights into those areas of human coexistence that are shaped by different forms of sensual experience and ways of knowing the world.

Proposing the notion of ‚relational aesthetics‘, we want to reflect on these tendencies and discuss them in the workshop by looking at empirical findings from various social worlds. The concept of ‚relational aesthetics‘ has been coined and critically discussed in art criticism and theory, where it refers exclusively to the creation of relations in the context of experiencing art. However, the concept could also be developed in a different way, by overcoming the narrow focus on art and by rethinking the original idea of the aesthetic as a reflection on the ways that we perceive and know the world and its objects and phenomena through the senses, in alignment with or alongside rational cognition.

We welcome contributions that engage with these perspectives, regardless of whether they deal with the ways that certain social or political stances are formed or acted upon, with processes of differentiation and exclusion/inclusion, with the role of music, theater or other art forms in society or with any other possible topic of current research that allows to reflect upon the different ways that non-human objects or phenomena affect social relationships and processes.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 1 | Room 3

Milena Pugina: Performative Nature of human-animal interaction within the urban space

Sophia Danielle Luongo: Fluid Boundaries: Regional Imaginaries of the Danube River

Otar Chanturidze: Aesthetics of Alterity. Human-animal interaction in nomadic reindeer herders of the Arctic region

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 2 | Room 3

Shona Desilva: Harmonising Heritage: An Analysis of the Goan Mando as a Relational Performing Art (maybe online)

Elena Kuznetsova: Reconstruction of Architecture and (re)creation of social spaces: case of the Russian North's wooden churches

Eva Fekonja: Aesthetics of Authenticity: Insights from three Slovenian singing choirs

SESSION PAPERS

Performative Nature of human-animal interaction within the urban space

Milena Pugina

The purpose of this work is to consider the current practices of human-animal interaction within urban spaces using the field data collected in places of such interaction. In the course of the study, it was found out that for a person within the urban space, contact with animals is a space for multiple performative practices of identity construction, which are realized not only within the physical boundaries of parks (places of interaction) but also in virtual ones.

The garden of the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg and its stable, the Alexandrian Garden in Peterhof and its large population of squirrels, and the Ornithological Park in Adler, where you can find "wild" geese and swans were chosen as such places.

Photos with animals in the three parks selected for the study have a special predisposition to be used to construct online identities, because animals are very unusual, which you will not find in any city apartment, but not on all farms/dachas/rural farms.

Particular interest poses the construction of the identity of a "special connection with nature" (a type of constructed identity I discovered and named during my fieldwork), which shows that for some urban residents, contact with animals is perceived as a kind of competition in who has a "deeper" and more significant connection. The desire to participate in such a "competition" suggests that "a person with a special connection with nature" as an identity has a certain social value.

During the research, through interviews and participation observation within parks

and with park visitors, it was found out that the construction of this identity includes not only various online performative practices but also physical ones: feeding and touching animals, as well as the practice of demonstrative “not touching” and other types of interaction with the park space and its inhabitants.

Fluid Boundaries: Regional Imaginaries of the Danube River

Sophia Danielle Luongo

Described as the most international river in the world, while also responsible for shaping a region that prides itself on borderlessness, the Danube River serves as an entry point to the duality of border imaginations in Central Europe. Rivers provide a conceptual opportunity to think with the cognitive fluidity of a constantly changing environment and aid in destabilizing culturally accepted norms about the boundaries of the world. How do people who work with and move along the Danube River imagine the borders and boundaries of the region? What can imaginations of fluvial border configurations on the local level communicate about widely held political assumptions regarding the nature of “boundaries” in society? My research shows that sailors, tourists, and administrators articulate the Danube Region as effectively borderless, while simultaneously in need of intense bureaucratic, technological, and/or militarized surveillance. The discourse of a borderless Central European Danube Region advances a narrative of European Exceptionalism by holding that this area of the world has progressed beyond the use of traditional borders riddled by conflict and contradiction. At the same time, the river and its mythos create “soft, natural borders” that strengthen national boundaries by offering a pseudo-explanation for their existence. This presentation reports on two months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, including participant-observation at a regional policy think tank located in Vienna, Austria, and along the river between national river-borders in Passau, Germany and Bratislava, Slovakia. Interviews were conducted with policymakers, river ship captains, regional tourism organizers, and tourists. Confronting the philosophical question of whether borderlessness is possible, this research explores the “edges” present inside a region, and highlights the need for a fluid approach to understandings of separation and connection.

Aesthetics of Alterity. Human-animal interaction in nomadic reindeer herders of the Arctic region

Otar Chanturidze

In my ethnographic paper, I will focus on strategies of perception and belonging in nomadic reindeer herding population of Polar Urals in Russia (primarily, Nenets people, an indigenous minority of the North), where I have conducted my fieldwork. I want to discuss human-animal relations and more broadly, environmental peculiarities that surround them. My theoretical approach is aimed at the structural and phenomenological details of such relationships, or ‘betwenness’, among diverse Tundra agents.

I want to entertain a specific concept of relationality according to which both herders and reindeer have their own agency and personalities, and through which their perceptions, experiences, subjectivity and the whole structure of social and at the same time interspecies interactions are actualized by the engagement in the practicality of the world (everyday activities). For me anthropology is about the concrete human experience of being-in-the-world with others in it (both human and non-human).

In some profound ontological sense, the Other is truly unknowable. Her world for me is a mystical world. But I can touch the 'surface' of the Other. If her mystery is unknowable, it is at least palpable. This gap between the Self and the Other is bridgeable, but no one is able to walk through that bridge. What I propose is an aesthetics of alterity by which I mean an experience of intersubjective sensitivity, when the otherness of the Other invisibly acts upon me from within, when we feel a mutual presence in each other's lives. We need a gesture that goes beyond understanding, interpretations, and beyond any textual representation of the Other. We might claim instead: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an aesthetics of the Other". Instead of talking about the Other, we shall face the Other; instead of 'interpretation of', there is a 'participation with'.

Harmonising Heritage: An Analysis of the Goan Mando as a Relational Performing Art (maybe online)

Shona Desilva

This paper explores the Mando, a Goan song-dance performing art, as a lens to understand the complexities of Goan identity through Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics which refers to a mode of art that focuses on human interactions and social contexts over traditional aesthetic criteria. The paper argues that the Mando, as a relational performing art, reveals the intricacies of Goan identity through its heritage preservation strategies. Through a relational aesthetics analysis, the paper explains how traditional performing art forms like the Mando can inform contemporary social identities and cultural continuity. The Mando's significance stems from Goa's history of more than 400 years of Portuguese colonialism, religious conversions, and the prevalence of casteism within Catholicism. "Mando" was first introduced into Goan society in the 1840s by the Catholic Brahmins from Salcete, who were known in the local language (Konkani) as Bamon Saxxtikars. In this culturally hybridized form, Mando emerged as a ritualistic song to be sung by the bride and groom at Brahmin Catholic weddings in the mid-19th century. The Mando festival, first organized in 1965, has made the performing art more inclusive, and different versions of the Mando performance in contemporary society also alter its cultural fabric. Studying the aspects of the Mando performance from an aesthetic perspective would critique the performing art on the basis of the composition of its music, the lyricality of its poetry, and the splendour of its costumes. In contrast, the relational aesthetics analysis of this paper, focuses on the human interactions and sociocultural context embedded within the practice of the Mando, that provides cultural significance to its performative aspects. By analysing the post-1965 Mando from the lens of relational aesthetics, this study reveals how specific stakeholders have preserved and conveyed the musical heritage of the Mando within changing socio-political landscapes in Goa.

Reconstruction of Architecture and (re)creation of social spaces: case of the Russian North's wooden churches

Elena Kuznetsova

Architecture as a form of art and social spaces that it forms have already become some of the key fields of the "new-materialist" approach in anthropology. In critique of N. Bourriaud's conception named "Relational Aesthetics" we can find the key idea of "relational aesthetics" approach: art can be seen as "a form of social exchange" (Martin S. Critique of relational aesthetics, Third Text, 21:4, 370). Nowadays wooden churches of the Russian North are one of the most well-known

features of this region (for instance, Kizhi). During the 20th century the huge part of this architecture was lost or damaged. At Late-Soviet and Post-Soviet periods the increase of projects aimed to preserve wooden churches of the Russian North was observed. Today volunteers in such programs are engaged in the process of heritage reconstruction, and, I confirm, recreation. These buildings and the new significance they gained (they used to be abandoned and now are under reconstruction and included into social life), give a new social space for specific relations. I assume that volunteer's experiencing this emotionally charged architecture during reconstruction has at least two consequences: it affects their behavior towards architecture, and it creates new relations between several agents (volunteers, local residents and government institutions). In its turn these new relations influence social landscape in the northern villages, paths of motions and communication in the rural Russian North today. Present report is aimed to analyze these social consequences through the lens of "Relational Aesthetics" conception: how experiencing of architecture by volunteers forms social relations and how these emotionally charged architectural spaces affect people's behavior and notion of self. The research is based on the participant observation carried between 2019 and 2024 years in the Russian North when I took part in different volunteer's expeditions.

Aesthetics of Authenticity: Insights from three Slovenian singing choirs

Eva Fekonja

The concept of authenticity holds profound significance within the fields of anthropology and heritage studies and has undergone various reconceptualizations and paradigmatic shifts. It shifted from an ideal that propelled early ethnographers to seek pure cultural forms, to criticism for its essentializing potentials. In the initial stages of my doctoral thesis research about the affective and political dimensions of singing "Balkan" folk songs in Ljubljana, authenticity emerged as one of the most prevalent ideas. Folk songs, due to their assumed authenticity, used to be seen as embedded in folk culture and therefore a distinctive feature of the nation and its culture. Such territorialized and monolithic conceptualization of cultures has been exceeded and the notion of authenticity as a pure cultural expression no longer corresponds to social reality, but the discourse of authenticity remains very much alive.

The members of three choirs that focus on "Balkan music" acknowledge that their musical endeavors, while often drawing inspiration from traditional singing, have been extracted from their original contexts, modernized, and transformed into performances. Nevertheless, many of them still regard authenticity the very essence that imbues their performance with meaning. How can we account for what appears such an obvious contradiction? In attempt to answer this question, I will explore overlaps and interplays between notions of heritage and affect, with particular attention to aesthetics involved in the cultural production of authenticity.

By emphasizing the social context of these singing choirs, I will highlight the role aesthetics play in different, but intertwined social dynamics, such as affective attunements to the past, political imaginaries of "the Balkan," and the heritagization, commodification, and brand-making of cultural practices. I will conceptualize the "aesthetics of authenticity" as a dynamic and contested social process, inextricable from political and economic realities.