

## Book Review

**Bruno Latour, Simon Schaffer and Pasquale Gagliardi (eds), *A Book of the Body Politic: Connecting Biology, Politics and Social Theory – San Giorgio Dialogue 2017, Venice: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 2020***

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On 9 October 2022 the world lost Bruno Latour. Regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of our time, he is mostly known for his work on actor-network theory (ANT) and political ecology. Less known is his work on art, itself inscribed in the track of networks and ecology. In this review I intend to reconstruct some connections between Latour and the world of art, starting from his collaboration with the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, a foundation for arts and humanities on one of Venice's islands, San Giorgio, and chaired by Pasquale Gagliardi from 2002 to 2020. In the last two decades, in the precious Biblioteca del Longhena, the Cini Foundation has been hosting regular meetings under the name of *Dialoghi di San Giorgio* ("San Giorgio Dialogues"). These dialogues have ingeniously and hospitably assembled participants from a range of different fields and with very different kinds of experience and expertise to debate issues of pressing urgency in contemporary culture and society. The 2017 Dialogue, developed by Bruno Latour, Pasquale Gagliardi and Simon Schaffer, was turned into a book published in 2020 by the Cini Foundation itself. The meeting focused on the "Body Politic", or better on how to rethink the *corpus politicum* in an age when the very notions of "body" and "politic", of "identity" and "sovereignty" have been shaken by the ecological crisis, what Latour (2017) elsewhere defined as the New Climate Regime. Indeed, the very first consideration of the Manifesto with which the three authors open the Dialogues concerns how metaphors travel across disciplines: ideas about the Body Politic come from ideas about the biological body, and vice versa. «There has always been a two-way stream of exchanges between biology, law, religion and social theory to the point that it is very difficult when people talk about ecosystems, identity, genetics, organism or globalization to decide if they speak about human or non-human entities» (p. 3). In this fashion, sociologists don't hesitate to employ images from biology, law or religion when they are referring to the individual and the social collectives, just as economists happily mobilize what they take as a "naturalistic" notion of competition to render the optimum calculable, while organization theorists borrow offhandedly the DNA metaphor of cell organization, and so on.

Accordingly, the scope of these Dialogues was to call scholars from biology, politics and social theory to discuss how metaphors move across their disciplines so as to develop new definitions of both "collective" and "individual" which can foster a better concept of the Body

Politic<sup>1</sup>. For the Dialoghi's curators (and here we can appreciate Latour's strong contribution, 2020a), Body Politic is to reframe the concept of "individual" and "collective" alike and consider them as co-constituents and thus move away from the assumption that each is an entity that is both separate and in relation – as the "social contract" notion has been perpetuating for several centuries now. «The adjective "collective" never refers to a change of levels, but to the superposition of collecting endeavors –scientific instruments and accounting devices being the most obvious ones [...] complicating the idea that the "whole is superior to the parts" and shifting attention to something more like "wholes are *in continuity with the parts and circulate through them*» (Latour, 2020b, p. 295).

This approach allows to take into account the challenges of ecology and complexity without falling into naively reassuring ideas of totality, completeness and order such as the ones which have dominated "modernity". The idea of Nature as an encompassing container "superior to the parts" is the most emblematic among the concepts that regard modernity, and the expression of a political project based on anthropocentrism and resources exploitation by humans. Gaia, on the other hand, is a rather different and less reassuring concept (Latour, 2017): it is neither a superorganism with some sort of unified agency, nor it is a whole indifferent to us, as it was for the Romantics. Rather, it is rather very sensitive to human actions (it is this, in fact, the sense of Anthropocene), although it follows goals that are not at all concerned with human well-being, as the results of our doings risk killing not Gaia but humanity itself. «So in the end, She is too fragile to play the calming role of old nature, too unconcerned by our destiny to be a Mother, too unable to be propitiated by deals and sacrifices to be a Goddess» (Latour, 2015, p. 29).

Gaia is a scientific concept, as much as Nature is. But it is the product of a different, non-modern epistemology (post-natural rather than post-modern for Latour), one that acknowledges the distribution of agency in networks of associations between humans and non humans. This approach, then, is what allows to rethink the political categories with the New Climate Regime in mind. «Gaia, as I began to reconstruct its original shape, was the aggregated result of the multiple actions, over eons of times, of the minuscule beings whose output spread, in a network fashion, *next to next*, creating new conditions for still other critters, without ever jumping to another level. This process could be only understood if thoroughly "flattened" in some sort of networky way» (Latour, 2020b, pp. 291-292).

How do we turn then this epistemology into categories that may orient our life and action, that is into politics in its wider sense? That's where the arts come into play. In one of his last interviews, Latour stated «the arts in general – poetry, visual arts, theatre, cinema – become so essential in this period. Without them we are trying, with a false realism – that is what ordinary sociology has become – to try to capture all these transformations, and, clearly, it is impossible» (Coccia, 2021). As Latour explained elsewhere (i.e. Latour, 2010), the false realism of sociology consists in looking for *explanations* while underestimating the *compositions*. To the contrary, his "compositionism" pays attention to how things join one another, *next to next*, without a predefined order, as what is composed is not imposed, but comes together precariously and is always exposed to change, or may *decomposed*.

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<sup>1</sup> The participants to 2017 edition of the "Dialogo di San Giorgio" were Deborah Gordon, Shirley Strum, Scott F. Gilbert, Isabelle Stengers, Didier Debaise, Mike Lynch, Kyle McGee, Timothy Mitchell, Tim Lenton, David Western, Bruno Latour and Simon Schaffer.

Art is the practice of composition *par excellence*, where assemblages of heterogeneous entities are crafted and made visible and sensible; as such, art is an essential practice to develop a new understanding of collectives (Latour, 2011). On the significance that art had in Latour's intellectual trajectory, it will suffice for us to mention his activity as an exhibitions curator (on which we will return later) and his collaboration with novelists (such as Richard Powers), visual artists (such as Tomasz Saraceno and Sarah Sze) and performance artists (especially Stéfany Ganachaud). This activity was compounded with his several scholarly works, where he dealt with art. A closer look at these allows us to better understand how it relates to the *political ecology* discussed in the 2017's Dialogue.

With regards to Latour's relation with Cini Foundation, in 2007, upon invitation by Pasquale Gagliardi, Latour (accompanied by Adam Lowe) attended what was at that time a delicate event. The occasion was a restitution to the City of Venice of Veronese's painting *Le Nozze di Cana* (1563), whose "original" had been "taken" by Napoleon in 1797 and on display at the Louvre Museum ever since. If the restitution was a delicate event for the political and diplomatic implications, it was also quite peculiar from an art related point of view. As just mentioned, it was a quite peculiar restitution in the sense that the painting shown in 2007 in Palladio's Refectory, the same Venitian venue for which it had been conceived in the 1500s, was actually a "reproduction" made by means of the most advanced techniques in digital acquisition and 3D printing.

This event was to give Lowe and Latour (2011) the chance to discuss the idea of originality in art. Expanding on Benjamin's critique of aura, they emphasized that an "original" work of art is such not for its being expression of an ethereal (metaphysical we could say) idea, but for its capacity to generate a progeny, what they call a *trajectory*. Art is material and as such it requires an ecology of care, from a technical as well as an organizational point of view, for it to keep living (conservation, restoration and surveillance activities in museums, to mention just the main areas of care). In other words, to keep their trajectory, all originals need to go through some kind of reproduction. Accordingly, a facsimile is itself an original work of art in a way, provided that the reproduction techniques utilized are tailor-made and thorough.

This type of approach is already present in an earlier essay where Latour (1998) remarked how art is made up of *mediators*. In his terminology (see Latour, 2005), the role of mediators is always to transform and translate the message they convey, instead of simply being its carrier. Art doesn't need to black-box mediators to claim a higher Truth, as happens in science and religion. In art, all the material-semiotic mediators are visible as they are undergoing construction (from the "content" to the tools, the materials, the conditions of fruition and so on). Building a *stable hierarchy* of those mediators is not a necessary premise to our finding it acceptable to consider an artwork as "made up" of a series of elements, regardless of how they are associated and combined. «In art it remains slightly easier than in science to be constructivist and realist at the same time» (p. 423).

Disregarding mediators by falling back on an essentialist epistemology, for which truth is unmediated (or immediate), is a trap in as much it is betraying oneself about supposedly lacking mediation and representation of any kind. This attitude, that has been accompanying western culture since its dawn, is reflected by *iconoclasm*. Latour's interest in this topic led him to work with Peter Weibel in 2002 in curating *Iconoclasm*, at Karlsruhe's ZKM art center. This exhibition regarded iconoclasm as a symptom of broader social and cultural issues: given that no essence or truth exists in pure form but only through signs and chains of translation (a basic principle of ANT), representation is inescapable. Therefore, iconoclasm as the refusal of

images/mediators, non-neutral carriers to access a deeper and unrepresentable truth (like in religion), always ends up producing new images, new mediators. *Iconoclash* is the term Latour and Weibel (2002) coined to define this paradox inherent western art: it is at once a threat for the Truth and the place where another, more complex truth is made accessible – that of compositions, mediations and networks.

Latour's collaboration with ZKM continued over decades, resulting in these exhibitions: *Making Things Public* in 2006 (always with Weibel), *Reset Modernity!* in 2016 (with Cristophe Leclerc) and *Critical Zones* in 2020 (with Peter Weibel, Martin Guinard and Bettina Korintenberg).

This last exhibition called on people to deal with the "critical" situation facing Earth as well as explore new ways of coexisting among all forms of life. In formulating its hypothesis, the exhibition's manifesto affirms that a "zone" differs from what we used to call "nature" because it is enigmatic and idiosyncratic. Over the decades, studies have made us aware of the complex composition and extreme fragility of this thin layer within which all life forms, humans included, have to cohabit. In this scenario Politics is no longer conceived as humans making decisions on their own and for themselves only, but has become an immensely more complex undertaking. The issue at hand no longer seems to be for humans to profit from their freedom in a world made of mere things, but for humans to learn how to swap their agency with countless life forms, each of which has its own ideas on what counts as freedom as well as on which sort of territory they wish to expand. New forms of citizenship and new types of attention and care for life forms are required then so as to generate a common ground, thus redressing questions of rights, freedom, property, responsibility and justice that have been reserved for humans only up until now (Latour, 2020c).

This was the very challenge that had already enlivened the San Giorgio Dialogues and which art can contribute in facing. Within the Anthropocene Epoch, all of the elements making up the body politic have swiftly gone from a *metaphorical* level (and the Leviathan comes to mind) to a *literal* one, as new forms of non human agencies are beginning to step into the political and social scene.

Whether we like it or not, the composition of politics must be extended to all of those phenomena. Art helps us undertaking this scope, and we may look at it as a laboratory where new heterogeneous collectives are "immanently" composed, as Deleuze and Guattari (1991) would say. Art, as a practice made of artists, materials, tools, technologies, but also organizations, exhibition and performance spaces, environmental factors and "wastes", is always a composition of humans and non humans. As such it turns those heterogeneous associations into "percepts" (to keep with Deleuze's and Guattari's terminology) while it respects their dependencies and precariousness. These two aspects are, in fact, among the main concerns of actor-network theory. Somewhat intriguing, in this regard, is that throughout his long lasting collaboration with artists, Latour never dealt with sound art which, amongst the performing arts, is perhaps the one that deals most with precariousness – as sound is not a stable object, but an "event" (Di Scipio, 2013).

As a way of making up with it, music opened the 2017 Dialogue meeting: a performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Tierkreis* – that in English literally means "animal circle" – played in the magical auditorium Lo Squero of Venice. As Latour (2020b, p. 286) comments, this music «had the same effect of joining political thought with the vibrations of the cosmos».

To summarize, in the New Climate Regime era, recomposing the Body Politics is the attempt of finding new forms of cohabitation and this must be done on the basis of new ideas that view collective life as including humans and non humans alike. While this attempt calls for the contribution of science and social theory, as well as that of art, the *fil rouge* among those disciplines and practices can be probably best found in *narrativity*. We can understand this term in the sense deployed in social and organization theory (see Czarniawska, 2004) as well as in “media archaeology” (Ernst, 2012): as not simple narration of human facts, but as the effort of writing *other* stories undertaking *different* points of view, using as many kinds of tools as possible (literacy, visualization, sonification, performance, computer simulation and so on), so as to let the non humans speak – metaphorically, but also literally as recent trends in new media arts are trying to do (Napolitano, 2022). This meeting of science, social theory and art in the framework of *narrativity* is probably better expressed by Latour’s last project of auto-description workshops in French villages (Coccia, 2021): exercises in collective building starting from the territories under attack, those critical zones that we need to learn to listen to first and foremost and do so on their own terms. To use Latour’s (2020b, p. 296) own words:

Narrativity is not a superficial way to patch up the strict objective description comprised of data points, but the very way in which life forms have to gain their precarious existence through the overlap with others. To tell stories is to be objectively faithful *to their ways* of exploring the world.

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