

*Art, Radical Ecologies and Class
Composition. On the Possible
Alliance between Historical and
New Materialisms*

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The more projects are multiplied around themes such as ecology, the Anthropocene or climate justice, the more the distance between historical materialisms and new materialisms grows. The latter are insisted upon in order to get rid of the former and, in so doing, the new ones are disciplined and depoliticised. This is an example of the governmental function that characterises the contemporary art circuit (at least the European-North American one) in the neoliberal era.

In *All Art Is Ecological*, Timothy Morton argues that the experience of artwork fruition can embody an example of a relationship that undermines the usual hierarchy between human and nonhuman in an ecological sense, where the term indicates a mode of “cohexisting nonviolently with nonhuman beings.”¹ After the dematerialisation operated during the conceptual season and the marginalisation of objectuality in the textual turn of postmodern criticism, Morton proposes to rehabilitate the work of art as object. According to the philosopher, the ecological relationship is manifested when the (human) spectator agrees to let herself be “seduced” by the (non-human) work, i.e. when the latter enters into syntony with the former, expressing its own agency and provoking a feeling of attunement: “the feeling of an object power over me. I am being dragged by its tractor beam into its orbit.”² Art, understood in this way, becomes a metaphor for an ecologically equal relationship between human and non-human, but also an experience that allows the viewer to recalibrate the relationship between herself and the world in a non-anthropocentric sense.

The problem arises because, according to Morton, such a potentially ecological relationship is only established on the condition of leaving aside any consideration of the institutional context, any analysis of the power relations, asymmetries, capture *dispositifs*, and toxic philanthropy that are

1 Timothy Morton, *All Art Is Ecological* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 43.

2 Ibid., 86.

at work in the institutional space and that, moreover, also act through the work of art, not only against or on it. According to this neo-materialist position, a condition for the recognition of the agency of matter is its liberation from the analysis of the social relations in which it is implicated. The result is an aesthetics that, wishing to go beyond Kant by taking him to his extreme consequences, in truth traces an idealist conception of art, in which the object is indeed in the foreground, but wrested from the socio-historical relations in which it is implicated or within which it acts.

The agent objectuality of art is presented by Morton in contrast to those critical positions guilty of having imposed attention on the context, the display and their possible reifying effects on the artistic experience: for example, Brian O'Doherty's now classic analyses of the white cube. According to this viewpoint, Morton argues, the reduction of art to an object represents the ultimate degradation. Hence, way to the redemption of the said object, which, however, necessarily passes through its isolation. Although Morton does not dwell on it, his aesthetics inevitably recalls the theme of art's autonomy. Autonomy then, but *à la* Morton, one that neither recalls the Adornian attributes of a paradoxical denunciation of commodity fetishism, nor it dialogues with Jacques Rancière when he describes the autonomy of art as a politically radical character, provided that this is understood historically in a necessary relationship with its opposite, i.e. elision into the social. This polarity, the French philosopher argues, is not universal, but historically determined, and emerges in the period from the birth of aesthetics to the historical avant-gardes, the interval in which the "aesthetic regime of the arts"³ is established.

3 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics as Politics, in Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (London: Polity, 2009), 29.

4 In Italian a difference exist between *potenza* and *potere*. A difference that is significant, for example, for Toni Negri and other thinkers of the Operaismo. English only has the word "power". Some translators choose to retain the Italian word, some others choose to render *potenza* as "power to" and *potere* as "power over."

The premises of Morton's reasoning are not to be rejected. Why, indeed, not recognise art as having a specific power, a possible autonomy, a capacity to subvert the distribution of the sensible, not only between human beings, but also in relation to other species and inanimate objects? Why not allow ourselves to be seduced by the work of art? To fully succumb to its flattery, however, it is necessary to understand its autonomy as historically determined instead of a universal phenomenon. It is also necessary to affirm, on the terrain of social relations, its autonomy not only with respect to a flat illustration of reality, but also with respect to neoliberal capital. Morton's analysis, however, by dismissing the materialist perspective, ends up in a dead end. Not only because it follows that all art is already an ecologically revolutionary experience, one only needs to know how to experience it correctly, but above all because Morton ends up affirming a universalist and anti-historical idea of art, in fact endorsing the hegemonic canon. Mind you, this last assertion does not claim that art as such is nothing more than bourgeois deception, to be guarded against. On the contrary, it is argued that criticism of the neoliberal use of art can intensify attunement or any other form of perception of the *potenza*⁴ that the work embodies and emanates.

A position like Morton's is a great gift to the neoliberal art *dispositif*. For if we do not sink our aesthetic reflection (also) into the analysis of material relations, then we leave the way open to phenomena of depoliticisation and spectacularisation. The British philosopher explicitly suggests that works (best when presented in the form of objects) must cease to refer directly to the real. Such an invitation seems implicitly to suggest that the more the work adheres to the hegemonic aesthetic canon, the more enigmatic, enchanting, vertiginous and pseudo-autonomous it becomes, the more it will be able to foster episodes of

tuning between the viewer and the object. Hyper-works of art as hyper-objects. And here we are confined to a model of art that is fundamentally disciplinary, that is to say, on the scale of the great biennial, the great gallery, the great museum, the great collector. This sensation seems to be confirmed by the examples Morton cites: a master of Abstract Expressionism (seen by a pop-star of exquisite sensibility) and a global installation art superstar, complete with a factory. We are in the presence of a neo-liberal capture aesthetic. This (albeit less brutally, but tremendously effectively) works to maintain the status quo. And although superficially opposed to it, it is actually in tune with the reactionary turn that is sweeping the art world. This worrying turn is certainly less insidious and more easily identifiable than neoliberal capture, but no less worrying. It can be seen at work, for example, in the silencing and marginalisation response that the institutional apparatus is opposing to the voices in solidarity of the Palestinian people, decimated in Gaza by a rain of bombs, at the time of writing.

Let us return, however, to the artistic *dispositifs* of neoliberal capture. According to T.J. Demos, despite their differences, Bruno Latour's and OOO's approaches present a common political limit: "An additional obstacle with some of these approaches is that proposal for new sociopolitical compositions, modeled on a cosmopolitical scenography of global governance, as in Latour's work, often lack a structural critique of neoliberalism (...). As a result we are invited to overlook the manifold violence that is climate change. In this regard, Latour's silence, or lack of direct engagement with corporate globalization, parallels speculative realism's characteristic political diffidence, its general withdrawal from the political sphere of human activities, swept aside in its eagerness to theorize object-oriented ontologies."⁵ This limit is, often opportunistically, mirrored by art. Of the use of new materialisms in a pac-

ified form, we have countless examples, and it seems to be a trend that will not end. One thinks of dOCUMENTA (13), curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in 2012. This was a pioneering example of capturing and defusing the conceptual arsenal of feminist and neo-materialist philosophers such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway. In the Kassel exhibition, categories such as the posthuman or methods such as speculative fabulation were declined without any friction with the neoliberal order, (granted that the posthuman has this potential in itself, given Braidotti's repeated public endorsements of neoliberal politicians) without altering a traditional curatorial approach in the slightest and without problematising the institutional structure of the commissioner. Exactly ten years later, the Venice Biennale curated by Cecilia Alemani picks up where dOCUMENTA (13) left off. In the curatorial statement, concepts such as the posthuman, names such as Rosi Braidotti and even Silvia Federici return to the foreground. That the reference to the latter is opportunistic can already be understood from the juxtaposition of the idea of "re-enchantment of the world,"⁶ coined by the Marxist feminist, with that of "individual mythologies," an expression that describes, in line with the practice and perspective of its creator, Harald Szeemann, a strongly reterritorialising idea of art. In Alemani's exhibition, enchantment seems to allude to a vague return of the magical (without any reference to the historical reading of witch-hunting as a war against women), while the only politics allowed are those of identity. But the re-enchantment of the world, for Silvia Federici, is not equivalent to a return (Eurocentric and reactionary) to forms of irrationalism and esotericism. It takes place, materialistically, in the struggles, especially rural and especially of women in the Global South, active in the defence of lands and commons threatened by capitalist extractivism. It is there that the world re-enchants itself, in the deployment

5 T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art And The Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 21.

6 Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World. Feminism and Politics of the Commons* (Auckland: PM Press, 2019).

of rationalities other than the capitalist one and in the rejection of the techno-developmental fetish.

So, without sounding prescriptive, the hypothesis of the Art For Radical Ecologies Manifesto initiators is that the quest for a radically ecological art today passes through an interweaving, rather than a mutual exclusion, of new and historical materialisms. The new materialisms, in the absence of a critique of social relations, turn into pacified aesthetics, limited to identity politics, themes of inclusion and representation. Specularly, historical materialisms, without the recognition of the agency of matter, run the risk of remaining caged in Promethean schemes and, from the point of view of the arts, of failing to valorise the power of speculation. Of course, the relationship between Marxism and ecology today is also profoundly renewed. Kohei Saito has, through a philological study of Marx's notebooks, brought out the ecological soul of the Trier born philosopher, emphasising his attention to scientific studies, biology and agrarian chemistry, from which he would have borrowed the concept of the limit of development. We are given an unprecedented Marx, from whom one could hardly deduce the morality of unlimited development of the productive forces as a horizon of liberation.

Andreas Malm, for his part, severely criticises Bruno Latour and his followers. His target is hybridism because, by promoting an intricate ontology, it would prevent discerning the specific responsibilities of the human (in particular capitalism) in the acceleration of the climate crisis. Not that Malm preaches a return to a strict separation of nature and society. On the contrary, he recalls that he has never adhered, precisely as a historical materialist, to a binary view separating the two fields. In fact, he maintains that they share the same substance, but have different attributes: "substance monist, property dualism."⁷ And it is only this distinction that makes it possible to

7 Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm, Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York, London: Verso, 2017), 55.

8 On the decolonization on dialectics through Frantz Fanon, see George Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham: Duke Press, 2017).

articulate a dialectics between nature and society; where dialectics remains a necessary methodological tool to distinguish the extractive forms of interaction (between human and non-human nature) from the ecologically and socially fair ones.

Indeed, the reference to the topicality of the dialectic also seems fitting with respect to an art world (the one we find ourselves in today, forged in the expansive phase of globalisation by relational aesthetics and the triumph of the biennial format) that, with its emphasis on dialogue, inclusion and representation, seems to have expelled negation and conflict, except, at best, in the “agonistic” version proposed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. The juxtaposition of dialectics and conflict is perhaps counterintuitive; I am referring, however, to a decolonised dialectics that passes from Frantz Fanon more than from Hegel, in which the movement of negation and the outcome of opening, rather than of synthesis-sublation, are exalted.⁸ At the same time, however, it is worth remembering Toni Negri and his fundamental “discovery” of the materialist genealogy of Machiavelli, Spinoza, Marx: an anti-dialectical strand, where dialectics is understood, even before Hegel, as a form of bourgeois thought, as a search for the sovereign and transcendent political synthesis against the idea of absolute democracy, against the expansion of revolutionary constituent power, in favour of its closure within the limits of formal constitutions. Thus, following in the footsteps of Malm and Negri, it can be argued that radically ecological action passes not only through the adoption of a decolonised dialectic, but also through opposition to bourgeois dialectics.

While some of Malm’s theoretical distinctions are necessary and clarifying in several respects, I do not share his belief that the recognition of non-human agency inevitably leads to the blurring of power relations. Rather, the challenge is to renew materialist analysis, politics and aesthetics in light of the accept-

ance of a diffusion of agency and a related fact: namely, the realisation that not all subjects in struggle compose the world in the same way. Indigenous peoples, for example. They do not need to read Latour to reject the separation of nature and society and, at the same time, they are certainly not pacified subjectivities. On the contrary, although annihilated by centuries of colonialism, they do not give up their struggle against contemporary forms of extractivism, and dispossession. Indeed, there are hundreds of indigenous artists and curators who interpret their work within the institutional art space as a moment of struggle against persisting colonial violence, necropolitics, land expropriation, extractivism and cultural appropriation. I am thinking, for example, of the Mapuche filmmaker Francisco Huichaqueo and his *Mencer: Ni Pewma* (2011), a kind of filmic nightmare in which centuries of colonial policies against the Chilean Mapuche are thematised, from the 16th Century, through the Pinochet regime, to the current neo-liberal policies of land expropriation. The register is not sociological documentary. According to Macarena Gómez-Barris, the director “breaks open the matrix of representational confinement and evacuation,”⁹ giving rise to a veritable “assault upon colonial modes of representation.”¹⁰ Translating the Mapuche sensibility towards both the visible and invisible world, Huichaqueo constructs a film in which nature has full agency “the land remembers”¹¹ and, at the same time, in which the role of the Chilean state (from Pinochet’s nascent neo-liberalism to more recent times) in the criminalisation of the indigenous defenders of land and water is denounced.

It is not, therefore, a question of imposing a way (mine) of criticising the world. Moreover, I am as aware of my class subalternities as I am of my race and gender privileges. Materialistically, however, it is true that the neoliberal art circuit is voracious with subaltern aesthetics, with certain possibilities and dangers that

cannot be ignored. Françoise Vergès has repeatedly pointed out that the visibility devoted to African artists and the diffusion of the term decolonisation often function as a smokescreen: “On one hand, there is often a bowdlerisation of the works, emptying some of all radical content; on the other hand, the structural organisation of those institutions and the economy of production and distribution of works have not been transformed.”¹²

Therefore, it is certainly good news that an increasing number of subaltern artists, scholars and curators have access to the “upper echelons” of the art system, but the danger is that they will be relegated to the terrain of identity politics and that the (albeit central and inalienable) theme of intersectionality will be deployed in a deterministic sense, imagining that opposition to the status quo will derive from subalternities automatically, without taking into account the subjectivising effects of capital—we will return to this. In the space of art, this determinism is often favoured by the opportunist blurring of the line of class subalternity; in fact reversing the error that, for decades, characterised orthodox Marxism, incapable of focusing on the forms of exploitation developed on the levels of gender, race and species. This is why the legacy of Zapatismo, its specific syncretism of indigenous cultures and Marxism, remains central. As Negri and Hardt recall, the Zapatistas “demand the right not to be who we are, but rather to become what we want.”¹³

So how is it possible to put at work together, not in opposition, the awareness of a more than human agency and the materialistic analysis of power relations? How is it possible to embrace fabulative speculation and, at the same time, an idea of imagina-

9 Macarena Gómez-Barris, *An Archive for the Future: Seeing through Occupation, in The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke Press, 2017), 68.

10 *Ibid.*, 68.

11 *Ibid.*, 69.

12 Françoise Vergès, “Let’s decolonise the arts! A long, difficult, and passionate struggle”, *Artalk Revue 4* – Winter 2020, 1–10.

13 Toni Negri, and Michael Hardt, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2009), 106.

tion as a common exercise in the construction of a time to come, as a collective character of present struggles?

Oliver Ressler's filmic work is, in this respect, interesting. It offers us, at the same time, a great archive of (European and global) movements for climate justice and a way of looking at nature, non-human beings and matter without ever understanding them as a backdrop to human action, but always as a vibrant presence. The long lingers of Ressler's camera on the landscape, a mine, a forest, a co2 storage facility, are not photographs of backdrops waiting for a human performance, instead they force the viewer to see them as full, as actors and not as sets.

The exhibition *Life on Planet Orsimanirana* (2021) at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg is a second example. Curated by Emanuele Braga, Jerszy Seymour, and Amica Dall, it is a case in which the speculative enterprise of inventing a planet in which care (intra-human and inter-species) becomes the compass of existence, is combined with a focus on the real struggles for the metropolitan commons and a successful attempt to deploy the museum in the context of a city campaign for the fate of a former power station, a place disputed between the owners, anxious to speculate, and a local cooperative that had proposed the public purchase of the asset to make it a cultural production centre. Many topics central to the exhibition were recently addressed by Emanuele Braga in his book titled *Moleculocracy*, where the author focuses on the genealogy of a counter-science, one opening up a vision of nature at odds with the one built by the science of capital.¹⁴

These practices seem to ideally dialogue with the work of Léna Balaud and Antoine Chopot, who propose a suggestive

14 Emanuele Braga, *Moleculocracy: Ecologie, Conflitti, Turbolenze* (Roma: Nero Editions, 2023).

15 Léna Balaud, and Antoine Chopot, *Nous ne sommes pas seuls: Politique des soulèvements terrestres* (Paris: Seuil, 2021, 56).

16 Ibid., 56.

17 Léna Balaud, "Des alliances pour recomposer une politique dans et contre l'écologie du capital", *De(s)génération(s)*, n°35, décembre 2021, "attaquer l'attaque", 47-56.

hypothesis of a renewal of the Marxist position. Indeed, they espouse the non-human turn, but argue that the “democratisation of agency”¹⁵ does not erase human responsibility, on the contrary, that it makes us more responsible in the face of the need to dismantle the current “*agencements écopolitiques*”¹⁶ and create new ones.

Balaud, for her part, recovers some of the tools of the operaista arsenal, in particular the analysis of class composition, but broadening the spectrum beyond just the relations of production between humans and integrating the nature put to work. Just as the operaisti argue for the primacy of workers’ resistance, i.e. the fact that it is the real engine of capitalist development, so the French researcher argues that non-human resistances, though certainly not consciously directed, propel the green revolutions of capital forward. In short, just as proletarians express a degree of autonomy in the face of capital, so does non-human nature. It is clear, however, that the autonomy of non-human nature is not consciously directed, it is not driven by any class consciousness. This is where the need to rethink class composition comes in. In fact, just as operaista research had first identified the “mass worker” and then the “social worker” as the subjects of this rupture, so it is a question of renewing this method in the light of the challenge posed by the Anthropocene. Today, according to Balaud, it would be necessary to proceed to the analysis of “ecological composition”¹⁷ starting from the study of the ecological phenomena involved in the capital relationship. The point, however, is that viewed from this perspective, the refusal of labour (another cornerstone of operaista theory) remains an open problem. Indeed, if in the 1960s the workers on whom capital depended were the same workers who could subjectivise themselves to hate it, the same thing cannot happen today in the relationship between eco-technical

and eco-political composition. The human cannot subjectivise itself in place of the non-human, nor can the non-human subjectivise itself as such.

Balaud then proposes to rethink class composition as a new system of alliances between human and other-than-human: “interspecific resistances”¹⁸ that can evolve into “interspecific factions.”¹⁹ A good example of the first kind “is the fight against Monsanto in Argentina and Paraguay. In response to the resistance to glyphosate of the superweed *Amaranthus palmeri*, the inhabitants of the area, dispossessed of their land and contaminated by pesticides due to GMO soya monocultures, recognised in the *Amaranthus* an initiative that needed to be responded to. Thus, a new mode of action was invented, suitable for collaborating with the weed’s resistance: they practised throwing *Amaranthus* seed bombs into the monoculture fields, thus amplifying its action of sabotaging soya production.”²⁰

Apart from the specific example and the proposal to consider a new eco-political composition, the reference to operaismo, in which the militant investigation into class composition is an essential moment of a method of political organisation, is useful because, unlike the sole emphasis on intersectionality (which, I repeat for the avoidance of misunderstanding, remains an indispensable tool of analysis), it takes into account the subjectivising effects of capitalism. Indeed, there is no deterministic relationship between lines of oppression and anti-capitalist subjectivation. This is clear if we look at the institutional circuit of art, a space in which capital often renounces its character of violent domination, functioning rather as an instrument of subjectivation that acts on subaltern subjects, discourses and imaginaries, annihilating their subversive potential. Class composition, by interweaving the analysis of the forms in which production is organised with that of the forms of life of the subjects put to

work, thus remains a useful concept-method for identifying revolutionary subjects and points of rupture, outside of any determinist scheme.

The question is: what are the new subjects or the new assemblages and factions that can embody radically ecological action? Clearly this is an open question, but also a valuable indication of aesthetic-political method for the artistic field, which can indeed represent an important laboratory. This, provided that the speculative force is not locked within rigid disciplinary boundaries; that creativity is not only declined as an attribute of the individual artistic operator in the market, but also as a character that the social is able to express. Decisive will be the maturity to act in a counter-hegemonic sense within the institutional space (where possible), but also the strength to make the abolitionist tension one's own and, consequently, the commitment to the (arduous, but necessary) construction of an alter-institutional infrastructure alternative to the neoliberal one.

18 Léna Balaud, and Antoine Chopot, *Nous ne sommes pas seuls*, 204.

19 Ibid., 305.

20 Léna Balaud, "Des alliances pour recomposer une politique dans et contre l'écologie du capital", 47-56.