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Eco-aesthetics. The art and aesthetics of relations from a post-pandemic perspective

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Abstract. «What does art mean in a world where urgency predominates, a world that now exhausts its annual quota of renewable resources in July?» (Bourriaud [2021]: 7; my translation). The climate crisis (which began in the last century, but whose consequences have become increasingly worrying in recent years), the Covid 19 pandemic that struck the planet in 2020 and the recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the heart of Europe are epoch-making phenomena that are inevitably reshaping the present and future of human societies. With respect to this situation, is art being called into question or, on the contrary, is it an essential tool for rethinking the world of tomorrow? More specifically, is public art today a lost cause or an opportunity? In this article, I will try to place these questions within the framework of what we might call eco-aesthetics, which has an essential connection to the category of “relations”.

Keywords: Public Art, Contemporary Art, Relations, Ecology, Contemporary Aesthetics.

1. ECO-AESTHETICS (I)

«Non uccidete il mare, / la libellula, il vento. / Non soffocate il lamento / (il canto!) del lamantino. / Il galagone, il pino: / anche di questo è fatto / l'uomo. E chi per profitto vile / fulmina un pesce, un fiume, / non fatelo cavaliere / del lavoro. L'amore / finisce dove finisce l'erba / e l'acqua muore. Dove / sparendo la foresta / e l'aria verde, chi resta / sospira nel sempre più vasto / paese guasto: “Come / potrebbe tornare a essere bella, / scomparso l'uomo, la terra”»¹ (Caproni [1998]: 788).

¹ «Don't kill the sea, / the dragonfly, the wind. / Don't suffocate the lament / (the chant!) of the manatee. / The bush-baby, the pine tree: / of this too is made / man. And don't make those who for vile / profit electrocute a fish, a river, / knights of the order of merit / for labour. Love / ends where the grass ends / and the water dies. Where / the forests and green air / disappear, those who remain / heave a sigh in the ever more vast / land of waste: How / could it be beautiful again, / the land, with the absence of man» (trans. by M. Colarossi <https://paralleltxts.blog/2019/08/05/giorgio-caproni-versicoli-quasi-ecologici-almost-ecological-versicoli/>).

In the poem *Versicoli quasi ecologici*, Giorgio Caproni takes a stance on the issues and dilemmas that began to emerge with increasing concern in the 1970s and 1980s. Driven above all by the logic of profit, human beings, who account for a very small proportion of the natural world, are “spoiling” what makes our planet beautiful, making it increasingly unbearable. However, it is essential to place ecological issues, the relationship between human beings and nature, and the balance between the quality of life, progress and respect for the environment within a framework in which the aesthetic dimension and reflection are central.

Caproni rightly points out that planet Earth would continue to exist without human beings, yet we could hardly consider it “more beautiful”. This is because the judgement of taste can only be formulated by human beings, in whose absence the judgement of taste, hence the assessment of the beauty of our planet, would also be lacking. Nevertheless, the responsibility we have for the place we inhabit requires a theory and practice that are commensurate with the situation. If, in a general sense, praxis is the domain of politics and morality and theory is the domain of science and philosophy, then we can also say, in a specific sense, that praxis is the territory of art and theory is the territory of aesthetics.

If we see ecology not as a “field of study” but as the “whole”, that is, «the dynamic process of life’s continuous transformation and evolution», it will appear to us «as a single entity that encompasses everything, generating continuous differentiations that become those different identities, the crystallisations that we find everywhere in the interstices of experience. This is what we call – abstracting – organisms on the one hand and environment on the other. There is thus no ecology without perception» (Perullo [2017]: 18; my translation; see Perullo 2021). If there is no ecology without perception, there can be no reflection on ecology in the absence of aesthetics. On the contrary, aesthetics, in the form of the philosophy of aesthetic experience, presents itself as a discipline capable of responding to the universalising and all-encompassing characteristics of ecology.

When speaking of *eco-aesthetics*, we might initially refer to an aesthetics that focuses on ecology as a “whole” and on human practices that start from certain artistic forms and become oriented towards the remodulation and reconfiguration of the relationships between human beings and nature, human beings and progress, growth and degrowth. By transcending the distinctions between rational aesthetics and the aesthetics of feeling, between the aesthetics of form and the aesthetics of content, between the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception, a range of theoretical and methodological approaches are brought together.

From this point of view, this hypothetical *eco-aesthetics* has some affinities with the notion of integral ecology proposed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si’* (2015). In it we read: «Since everything is closely interrelated, and today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis, I suggest that we now consider some elements of an *integral ecology*, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions» (Franciscus [2015]). The proposal for an integral ecology is underpinned by a number of premises: (a) the need to insist on the interconnections between time and space, between living organisms and the environment, between nature and society and between the environmental crisis and the social crisis; (b) the existence of a socio-environmental crisis to which one must respond not with the fragmentation of knowledge, but with an attempt to provide an integrated and broad vision of reality; (c) the need to think of reality as a plurality of deeply and closely connected “ecosystems”; d) the urgency of placing the quality of life of individuals (the «ecology of daily life»), communities and institutions at the centre of public debate, political action, scientific research and theoretical reflection, within the framework of a «social ecology»; and e) the need to preserve the historical, artistic and cultural heritage of communities («cultural ecology»), as well as the immense cultural variety whose richness is threatened by unchecked globalisation.

The universal interrelationship that underlies integral ecology is also the prerequisite for any philosophical approach that seeks to investigate not just the relationship between human beings and the environment, but also, in a more specific sense, the question of “relations” in the aesthetic sphere.

2. ECO-PHILOSOPHY. SOME ANNOTATIONS

In order to focus on eco-aesthetics, it is first necessary to emphasise certain aspects of contemporary thought oriented towards a possible “eco-philosophy”.

Philosophy has been addressing the environmental crisis and the development of ecology, particularly in the field of ethics, since the 1960s. Approaches such as the ecological ethics of Aldo Leopold (1968), the “deep ecology” of Arne Naess (1973, 1989, 2002) and the environmental ethics of William Blackstone (1974) have gradually moved towards more specific questions. Once it had been accepted that the sphere of moral consideration cannot be limited to human beings (traditional ethics) and animals (animal ethics), but must be extended to nature in its entirety, the need to thematise the “ecological crisis” emerged.

The natural environment is no longer considered a mere “stage” on which human affairs unfold, but a unitary organism of which the human being is a part. This means that a) human beings must exercise increasingly stringent and active responsibility with regard to natural ecosystems; b) the destruction of nature must entail the self-destruction of the human being.

Leaving aside now some of the directions taken by 20th century continental philosophy², it should be noted that the need for a revival of philosophical (and aesthetic) reflection on envi-

ronmental issues has become particularly urgent in recent decades. This led to the emergence at the beginning of the 2000s of a worrying absence of lively “philosophical debate” concerning certain issues capable of transcending the boundaries of academic dialogue. As Charles Brown and Ted Toadvine have rightly pointed out, «Although a few voices can be heard calling for philosophical examination of our predicament, they are a small minority. For the most part, we are living through a massive cultural propaganda exercise dedicated to the task of convincing ourselves that the dominant cultural forces have identified the problem and are working steadily toward appropriate solutions» (Brown, Toadvine [2003]: ix).

At the turn of the millennium, Brown and Toadvine lament, philosophy still seemed to have found neither an effective voice in the fight against the environmental crisis nor a clear role in the search for a sustainable human presence on Earth. Twenty years on, the situation does not seem to have substantially changed. Certainly, at the level of public opinion, sensitivity towards the environment has increased, not least as a result of the international “Fridays for Future” movement. However, in addition to the lack of a radical political breakthrough on the part of the Earth’s most powerful figures, philosophy is struggling to make itself heard with a strong voice. It might be wondered whether this is due to an inability to communicate or to a closure of public opinion towards philosophy, but let us return to Brown and Toadvine’s proposal.

According to the two philosophers, phenomenology can play an important role in the philosophical analysis of our relationship with the natural world. As a philosophical method it is particularly suited to solving the dilemmas posed by the ecological crisis thanks to two essential characteristics, both of which are opposed to the reductionism of science: a) the return to “things themselves” and b) the critique of scientific naturalism. The combination of ecological thinking and phenomenology has given rise to what is known as *eco-phenomenology*. It «is based on a double claim: first, that an adequate account of our ecological situation requires the methods and insights of phe-

² I refer in particular to Martin Heidegger’s idea of the *Um-welt*, Hanna Arendt’s idea of the world as a home for humans during their life on earth, Hans Jonas’ principle of responsibility and Karl-Otto Apel’s exploration of the relationship between ecological crisis and the ethics of discourse.

nomenology; and, second, that phenomenology, led by its own momentum, becomes a philosophical ecology, that is, a study of the interrelationship between organism and world in its metaphysical and axiological dimensions. Of course, this cross-disciplinary inquiry is still in its infancy; how the dialectical exchange between ecological thinking and phenomenology will operate is a matter that only future work can determine. Nevertheless, the essays we have collected here provide a first sketch of the contribution ecophenomenology can make for us today» (Brown, Toadvine [2003]: xiii).

What we are particularly interested in is the centrality of the category of relations in the ecophenomenological approach. In Brown and Toadvine's proposal, the interdisciplinary examination sought by phenomenology can contribute to an analysis of the historical and institutional construction of the "natural" and the role it plays in the formation of our individual and cultural identity. In the volume edited by the two philosophers, this eco-phenomenology arises, as we have said, from the combination of Husserl's phenomenology with contemporary environmental thought. However, there is no reference to Alfred North Whitehead's organicism (and its combination with Husserl's thought), which, from my point of view, may be more useful in emphasising the need for an eco-philosophy oriented towards the construction of a new relationship with nature.

Whitehead is convinced that the adventure of existence and the path of culture and science (hence the developments of civilisation) are directed towards truth, whose laws, despite human beings' crises and failures, are destined to triumph. This tendency towards harmony and perfection is compatible with human failures because this movement towards perfection is not linear, but dialectical. As Enzo Paci has written, it results from «collision and adaptation between actual occasions and groups of occasions, between organisms and organisms, between determinate forms and determinate forms, between contrasting forces that cancel each other out or anaesthetise each other or find a higher harmony in the contrast itself» (Paci [1965]: 146; my translation).

Civilisation is the result of an organic relationship between existence, culture and science. This relationship manifests itself as much between truth and history as between eternal forms and the process of becoming. Whitehead's entire philosophy is based on this dialectic between eternity and possibility, rejecting the idea that the world and life can be explained as if they were a mosaic whose tesserae (pieces of matter in space and time, Whitehead would say) are linked in an exclusively causal relationship. In fact, the world is much more than the causal relationships that hold its parts together, which are to be considered above all in terms of their reciprocal relationship and the more general context of a universal connection: «every event in nature is connected to the history of the universe» (Paci [1965]: 35; my translation).

If we seek to emphasise the centrality of relations and experience, the comparative analysis proposed by Enzo Paci may be useful. He traces the similarities between Whitehead's and Husserl's thought to three issues: a) the relationship between the "life-world" and scientific formalisation and logic; b) the intentional and teleological character of the concrete process and the historical process; c) universal correlation.

Both Whitehead and Husserl are critical of the distance that has been created between the world of science (made up of formalisations, ideal models, conceptual constructions) and the world of concrete reality (which, in our case, includes the natural environment). According to Whitehead, it is not perceptions that originate in mathematical formalism, but the opposite: the latter is generated by abstraction from the real process. Science on the other hand assumes and poses its own abstractions as concrete realities. This critique of *misplaced concreteness* highlights the concretisation of scientific abstractions, a process which, without delegitimising scientific research and its function, has inevitably led to the abandonment of what is really concrete, namely the «Field of Life» (Whitehead [1920]) and, we might add, the "field of nature".

Paci finds in this position of Whitehead's an echo and a strong analogy with Husserl's criticism

of the European sciences, considered responsible for having constructed idealisations and objectivisations that have left behind the original, primary and concrete relationship with the *Lebenswelt*, the only common and perceptible universe. It should be remembered that for Husserl, the *Lebenswelt* (the definition of which can also apply to Whitehead's «Field of Life») «represents a connection of pre-scientific experiences, around which every type of human experience, including scientific experience, must be oriented, because it constitutes the sensed structure of the world, that is, the foundation of meaning to which every observation of reality must refer, since the *Lebenswelt* is the unitary and unique world of life» (Signore [2006]: 222; my translation). Thus, the world of experience arises first and foremost from perception, and its proper dimension is (as Whitehead would say) concretely perceived time, or (as Husserl says) lived time. However, here we approach the aesthetic sphere, which we will return to in the final paragraph. The reference to eco-phenomenology and Whitehead offers us a theoretical field of reference to support the hypothesis of an eco-aesthetics. In the meantime, since relations are considered central, let us now proceed with other possible interpretations of this concept.

3. RELATIONIST AESTHETICS, RELATIONAL AESTHETICS, AND THE AESTHETICS OF RELATIONS

As I have already mentioned (Fronzi [2009]), the twentieth century was a cultural epoch in which the *dominant* principle – as Giuseppe Semerari states – was that of relations, as opposed to the principle of *substance* (Semerari [1991]: 18). The centrality of the principle of relations represents the inevitable starting point for a discourse focused on how contemporary art can (or cannot) establish a transformative relationship with reality. Emphasising the centrality of the category of relations has a double advantage: 1) it draws attention back to the relational dynamic, from which one cannot escape (and whose psychophysical density

has clearly emerged in the time of “social distancing”); 2) it adopts a “relationist” approach to the reading of reality that can be presented as a «cultural programme still and always open to all possible integrations», since «the relationist attitude» is fundamentally «anti-systematic and programmatically open» (Fanizza [1965]; my translation). In this general framework, aesthetics finds its proper place, understood both as a philosophical discipline (which investigates the articulations of sensory experience in all its forms) and as a fundamental characterisation of our relationship with the world.

The aesthetic theorisation of relationships can take shape in very different ways. Recently, for example, Roberto Diodato (2021) articulated a proposed «aesthetics of relations» by specifying that it is not an aesthetics of “relational properties” or semi-things or atmospheres (Griffero [2010], [2013], [2016]). As Diodato points out, the genitive in «aesthetics of relations», is both subjective and objective, and thus it delineates both an ontological and epistemological field: «The aesthetic *logos*, that is to say, the *logos* which is aesthetic, hence a body as much as the body is *logos*, implies the relation as such, which is what makes what we call aesthetics possible, that is to say, to complete the circle, the exercising of aesthetic *logos* (Diodato [2021]: vii)». As the author himself explains, in his proposal, starting from the notion of the system, an investigation of relations as a basic principle, as a constitutive entity, is presented. This conception of relations finds its model of reference in «subsistent relations»: «This becomes especially clear by means of an inquiry into virtuality and its ontology as resistant to commonly available categories. Existing only thanks to interactivity, virtual bodies are indeed an ontological hybrid; the plexus of body and image, object, and event, internal and external, artificial and living; existing only thanks to interactivity, they make an exemplary case for the primary nature of the category of relation, especially when appearing within the context of artistic operations opening new horizons of aesthetic and ethical potential» (ivi: ix).

Another possible interpretation of the role of the “relations” in aesthetics is that proposed

by Fabrizio Desideri (Desideri [2004], [2011]), who attributes to this notion a central role in the mechanisms of aesthetic experience. According to Desideri, the aesthetic relation must be distinguished from the relational character of other types of perception. In fact, unlike other forms of relation to the object, in the case of the aesthetic relations it presents itself as an event, an occurrence, something that has its own intimate eventuality. In this context, the relation – whose characteristics already emerge in Kant's *Third Critique* – must be considered in its double articulation: internal and external. Without the internal level, Desideri argues, we would drown the specificity of aesthetic pleasure in a generic emotion with no object other than itself, or in some phantasm of memory or imagination. Without the latter, the index of reality, albeit sui generis, of the aesthetic object would fall away and the experience of it would be confused with a pure imaginative projection, bordering on reverie (Desideri [2004]).

Now, however, I would like to focus on a few theoretical directions that, over the last fifty years, have made further contributions to the investigation of the relations in the aesthetic field (or the aesthetics of the relations), firstly, in the Italian context with Enzo Paci and Franco Fanizza, and secondly, in the French context with Nicolas Bourriaud. To insist (a) on relationism (and the associated relationist aesthetics), (b) on the *esthétique relationnelle* and (c) on the aesthetics of relations as it might be declined in this context may seem ambiguous, equivocal, and unclear. The terms of the question should therefore be premised and put in order.

(a) Enzo Paci has pointed out how modern Western thought has truly overcome the metaphysics of substance without relations. Put simply, this metaphysics was vitiated by the conviction that it could reduce the multiform existent to a self-sufficient unity. However, in the philosophy of relations, the «forms» do not become «substances» but on the contrary, an attempt is made to identify their possible interdependencies. Paci, who did not fail to reflect on the possible aesthetic decli-

nation of the philosophy of relations, recalls how John Dewey, as a philosopher «of universal inter-relations», was concerned with «re-establishing the relationship between art and “normal experience”, [...] experience understood as the interaction of historical events. There is therefore on the one hand a substance and a spiritual activity that can be called art, and on the other hand another activity that can be called philosophy or history» (Paci [1954]: 184; my translation). Again based on Dewey's reflections, Paci affirms that the «aesthetic category» is always present in experience and in the spirit, otherwise it «would not be a category, a form, an activity, a necessary mode of universal interrelation» (ivi: 185; my translation). Art, continues Paci, «is comprehensible only when connected to the structure of form and to the fact that everything that exists, in nature and in human life, as well as in the universe in general, could not exist if it did not have a form» (ivi: 198; my translation).

Concerning the question of art, the primary and immediate consequence is «the discovery that one cannot pose this problem in terms of the absolute autonomy of the artistic sphere» (Fanizza [1965]: 13; my translation). The idea of universal interrelations implies (and this is a further reflection within relationist aesthetics) that the artistic fact should also be considered in terms of its intrinsic relationality and not within a presumed radical and absolute autonomy, since «although never necessarily determined, art is always relative autonomy» (ivi: 14; my translation). Every single artwork, from the point of view of a relationist aesthetics, should be considered in terms of «tension», serving as a node between past and potential relations, and therefore within a relational system oriented towards the active transformation of the past into the future. Questions arising from the «possibility» of relations are of no small importance and particularly problematic, since «relations are connected from the outset to the risk of non-relations or, in other words, of the impoverishment of relationality» (ivi: 19; my translation), that is, alienation.

Relationist aesthetics is therefore a vision of both reality experienced perceptually and there-

fore «felt» (Whitehead-Paci) and the aesthetic conception within the framework of relationism. In the latter case, it rescues the artwork from an inconclusive and inconceivable isolation, inserting it into a relational-communicative fabric. It also serves as «a multidimensional aesthetics» or more precisely as «an aesthetics of creation-consumption» (ivi: 20; my translation). An essential element of the relational perspective that this aesthetics recognises is its substantial transcendental dimension, understood as a dimension within which what one wishes to say cannot but assume the connotations of the indefinite and ambiguous: «The principle of transcendentalism is intended to underline the continuous overflow of meanings despite all attempts to contain them within fixed boundaries» (ivi: 27; my translation).

Although there is no direct link between this strand of continental philosophy and the Anglophone analytical philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century, parallels between their respective conclusions can be seen. To be more precise, if we take Arthur Coleman Danto's thought as an example (though certainly not exhaustive) of the analytical approach to certain typical themes in aesthetics, such as the question "what is a work of art?", we can see how the category of *relations* has taken on very important connotations in this sphere too. Starting from the criticism of those theses of Wittgensteinian origin according to which art and artworks are something that cannot be defined (as is the case, for instance, with the theories of Morris Weitz), Danto attempts to propose and follow a way to reach the essence of art. This hypothesis is based on a central element in Danto's thinking, which he arrives at by starting from the enigma – as with Duchamp's bottle rack or Warhol's Brillo boxes – whereby two perceptually *indiscernible*, completely identical objects possess different ontological status, such that one becomes an artwork and the other remains an object of common use. Starting from this problem, Danto tries to solve the enigma not by starting from the differences of an «aesthetic» (i.e. sensorial) nature, since there are none, but from the *relational properties* that link

the object in question with elements external to it, which are not perceptible. And it is thanks to the identification of the *relational properties* that link an artwork to everything that the eye or the senses cannot attest to that the interpretation and consequently the understanding of that work is made possible (Danto [1981]).

The topic of *relations* (or «family classes») has been prominent in analytical aesthetics since the mid-1950s. In his paper *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics* (1956), Morris Weitz initiated an intense debate on the essence of art, a debate within which the *relational* question emerged. The discussion Weitz started has involved philosophers such as Mandelbaum, Dickie, Wollheim, Levinson, Beardsley and Danto, whose proposal, as we said, is centred on the identification of those relational properties that allow an artwork to be presented as such³. Danto's theory can be included among the various ways of investigating art by means of the category of relations, although from the point of view of the *aesthetics* of relations, which we are dealing with here, the reflections of the aforementioned exponents of analytical aesthetics seem to be similar to the relationism of Paci and Fanizza. Indeed, in both cases, reference is made to the web of relations within which the work of art is inserted, and which cannot be ignored if we seek to interpret and understand that work. Therefore, albeit with a degree of distortion, this declination of analytical aesthetics could be included within the relationist orientation.

(b) Aesthetic theory consists of «judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt» (Bourriaud [2002]: 112). This is how Nicolas Bourriaud defines *relational aesthetics*. While in the case of Paci or Fanizza it was somehow a question of applying the categories of relationism to aesthetics and its problems and therefore of reading aesthetics through the lens of relationism, for Bour-

³ On relations in analytic aesthetics, see Weitz (1956); Danto (1964, 1973); Mandelbaum (1965); Dickie (1969, 1974); Levinson (1979); Beardsley (1981).

riaud it is a question of proposing an aesthetic theory that evaluates works of art starting from an analysis of their capacity to *produce* inter-human relations. This tendency constitutes a distinctive feature linking all those artworks created in the 1990s that Bourriaud himself has defined as «relational». By relational art we mean «a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space» (ivi: 113).

With the introduction of this notion, the French critic emphasises some specific traits of a relational work of art, which in some ways run counter to the relationality cited by Paci and Fanizza. Relationist aesthetics focuses on the web of relations (temporal, historical, social, cultural, etc.) within which the artist, the work of art and the user are placed. In contrast, the relational works of art to which Bourriaud refers tend to try to cut the threads that bind them and would allow them to be swallowed up by the very inauthentic system that they ultimately seek to oppose by providing an alternative to it. But how? By creating environments and situations of confrontation and cooperation in which authentic and disinterested inter-human relations can be created and multiplied. In this way, relational works of art create a sort of parallel reality, a suspended territory, an intermediate zone to which the artist adds human and community shades.

Despite the references of a sociological and almost political nature, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics probably lacks a more open perspective (which in contrast characterises relationist aesthetics), according to which the degree of relationality of an artwork is linked not exclusively to its capacity to produce inter-human relations but above all to the very essence of art, which, as we will attempt to make clear, can only be said to be relational. Thus, rather than a general theory, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics appears to be a specific theoretical arrangement of an equally specific current in contemporary art, which does not exhaust the theme of relationships in the artistic-aesthetic field. Moreover, the interaction of rela-

tional artworks is a merely procedural matter, with no reflexive basis (Michaud [2003]).

(c) From what has been said so far, the aesthetics of relations, which in the following pages we will try to bring out, could be said to merge the basic characteristics of both relationist and relational aesthetics. It begins to take shape with Kant's treatment of the universal communicability of beauty, which is joined by the notion of the «aesthetic community» proposed by Antimo Negri (1968). From Kant's reflections, intertwined with the thought of Schiller, arises the controversial and complex question of the sublime, which in the twentieth century has frequently been used to «read» contemporary aesthetics and poetics.

It is precisely Kant's sublime that enables the direct passage from the eighteenth century to the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, when it becomes necessary for the artist to involve the public, sometimes in a shocking way and sometimes in a more simply participatory way. In the 1970s, these developments, which also marked the poetics of the post-war neo-avant-garde, favoured the creation by Hans Robert Jaus (1982) of a new approach – traces of which can already be seen in Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (1962) – in which the work of art is no longer analysed from the point of view of its production (*aesthetics of creation*), but from that of its consumption (*aesthetics of reception*).

Artistic research from the 1950s onwards became increasingly attentive to the inclusion of the user in the mechanisms triggered by the artworks. With the relational art which Bourriaud refers to, this arrived at the direct and active involvement (indispensable for the success of the artwork) of the users, no longer considered in terms of their singularity (as had been the case in previous decades), but their relationship with other users.

The aesthetics of relations that we propose here therefore differs from the two models previously mentioned (although in some ways it incorporates them) in two fundamental ways. The first concerns the fact that unlike relational aesthetics,

it does not limit itself to the analysis of the relational processes that are constituted within the work (aspects that are not, in any case, neglected), but attempts to fathom the various ways in which *relations* (in the sphere of any aesthetic experience and therefore not only what pertains to relational art) can be presented, starting from the assumption that art, in itself, is relational. At this point, it could be said that the aesthetics of relations is the exact replica of relationist aesthetics, to which, moreover, it inevitably looks. In reality, and this brings us to the second point, we adopt the general point of view of relationist aesthetics, which considers art to be «process and relation, temporality full of planning, formativeness», but also «in its unconscious depth, the myth of death and rebirth» (Fanizza [1991]: 123; my translation).

This aesthetics of relations thus supports an aesthetic approach to relations that has art and artists as its sources, its generators. In a world in which we have moved towards the aestheticisation of existence and of every kind of experience, in a world in which art, with its vaporisation and volatilisation, has become depoliticised and has seen its critical potential reduced, it is necessary to revive its political and ethical depth, in order to endow it once again with that capacity to affect reality which the cancellation of the boundaries between art and life has drastically reduced. Public art falls within this framework.

4. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL PRESENCE OF ART

Public art is generically any artistic expression oriented towards the critical (and sometimes highly polemical) questioning of themes, problems, needs, deficiencies and emergencies identified within the urban social fabric. The public artist also seeks to meet the need of contemporary human beings for aesthetics, no longer by focusing on beauty, but by means of political action, in the broadest sense, aimed at improving living conditions. This type of artistic practice thus makes manifest an ethical-political motive, and it is no coincidence that it is an art rooted in the urban

context, in search of lost “community”. «Public art is a complex, multifaceted discipline, and it is this very diversity and multiplicity that lies at the heart of its struggle not only for critical recognition but also for an understanding and recognition of a shared history» (Cartiere [2016b]: 14).

There has been a growing commitment of art to the critical development of the inhabited environment. Regarding the new architectural and urban planning structures, artists have shown themselves to be capable of grasping the rapid mutations and consequent degeneration (foreseeable or already happening) of these structures, taking up new causes, strongly customisable and critical, the result of the attempted convergence between the individual and the collective. As pointed out at the international conference entitled *Art and Life. Experiences and ideas for urban transformation and social quality* (Triennale, Milano, 19th October 2007), artists are increasingly articulating a demand for quality of life, measuring themselves against urban space and issues relating to the public sphere.

Artists who create works of public art seek to create (or recreate) environments and situations (happenings, performances, environments, etc.) capable of modifying the context within which they are developed, aiming at the direct involvement of its usual inhabitants. Public art aims to place artistic research within urban, metropolitan and landscape coordinates, and in contiguity with the everyday business of life. Public artists share a tendency to bring out, in the social and urban fabric, the impalpable and poetic texture of everyday life, as well as its conflicts and problems. This is a current and real approach, no longer contemplative or virtual, in which artistic action aims to dismantle the contradictions typical of the present age, such as those linked to the complexity of multiculturalism, aseptic inter-subjective relations and the impact of urbanisation on the landscape and the environment.

As early as the 1960s, Filiberto Menna pointed out the need for artists to step outside the traditional boundaries of their work to face the progressive social *uprooting* that characterised it.

This condition of *uprooting* is accompanied and contrasted by a very strong tendency towards extroversion and involvement in the events of life, which pushes the artist to go beyond the traditional boundaries of his activity. These two opposing dimensions find, however, an intermediate concept that connects them, *commitment*: this «prevents the process of uprooting from closing itself off again within a pessimistically existential condition and in contrast enables it to be accepted with all the risks but also the potential for liberation that it entails, given that it presents itself as a condition free (or relatively free) from immediate social conditioning». It is not, however, a question of ideological-political commitment in the traditional sense, whose «sclerotic properties» (as Menna calls them) have emerged, nor in a purely technical-specialist sense. Rather, it is a commitment in which the technical-aesthetic contribution «expands to include an ideological dimension, in the sense that it points to the aesthetic dimension as a fundamental and indispensable factor in the building of an authentically free society» (Menna [1968]: 14-15; my translation).

Firstly, we would like to propose an articulation of relations in the artistic-aesthetic sphere that seeks to take account of the different perspectives from which it can be read. In the aesthetic experience we can therefore consider five modes of relation.

Pathic relations (the passive relationship between artwork and user). This type of relation is intended to underline the “pathic”, emotional character of a contemplative and “passive” relationship with the artwork. It concerns the relationship with the artistic object, whatever type it may be. The adjective “pathic” is preferable to others since it relates to the emotional sphere and sensitivity without directly conferring either a positive or a negative connotation. Consequently, it can be presented as an attractive or repulsive, pleasant or unpleasant relation. This type of relation can be said to be supratemporal, in the sense that it concerns the enjoyment of any work of art, whether it was created in the 15th or 20th century, for example.

Active relations (the active relationship between artwork and user). This type of relation focuses on the active and productive involvement of the user, without which there would be no artwork. In this type of relation, the action of the spectator is central. Indeed, by means of a gesture or behaviour expressly requested by the artist or simply improvised, the spectator brings the work to life, literally makes it real, “realises” it. The key characteristic of this relation is precisely the participation of the user (individual) in the realisation and success of the artwork.

Communicative relations (the relationship between users). This third type could be likened to the third of the three dimensions which according to Jaus characterise aesthetic experience, i.e. *katharsis*. The communicative relation relates to the intersubjective moment of aesthetic experience but should not be limited to the linguistic and communicative mechanisms of community cohesion that it can trigger. This type of relation is to be understood in connection with the *active* relation, which means that the intersubjective relation it entails concerns the collective participation of the various users, no longer considered in terms of their singular and individual interaction with the artwork.

Ethical relations (the relation between the work, the user and the world). This level relates to the ethical vocation of every artwork. Art is a means of understanding the world and existence and must concern itself with the latter. If art is not to be considered purely as entertainment or mere enjoyment or, even less, as something to be “consumed”, it is impossible not to recognise cognitive and ethical dimensions in it. «What art communicates to us does not seek to be abstractly understood, it does not wish to be translated and betrayed with other words. What the message really wants is to be fulfilled, it wants the immediacy of the possible, which began in aesthetic expression, to develop and grow within us; it wants our whole lives, within ourselves and others, to be transformed and become new lives, new ethical phenomena fulfilled in history» (Paci [1993]: 149; my translation).

The final level, which merits a more extensive discussion, is *ecological relations*.

5. ECO-AESTHETICS (II)

The specific theme of so-called “public art” lies within this general historical framework. Many examples of public art seem to be supported by the idea of an artistic practice so active and rooted that it appears capable of modifying, in a positive way, its connotations. Nevertheless, «The history of public art is most often told with an emphasis on the word “art,” and very little consideration of the public context» (Finkelpearl [2000]: 5). This is even truer in the pandemic and post-pandemic world, as the health emergency has reshaped every aspect of our lives, including how we inhabit spaces.

The art of today (relational art and public art in particular) tends to speak to the need of contemporary human beings for aesthetics, no longer via the instrument of beauty (although it seems to be re-emerging) but via action aimed at improving people’s lives. Art is thus intertwined with the ethical-critical motive, which in turn must strive to achieve a “better” life, since the need for aesthetics most often conceals a deeper need for sociality. Aesthetics thus intersects with art by addressing issues related to the “quality of life” and relations that the new art is committed to enacting.

One can therefore understand how artistic activity might adopt an *aesthetic* relational attitude as a function of a broader *ethical* relational attitude. Public art seems to respond directly to prerogatives of this nature, in which aesthetic, ethical, political, social, and functional components intertwine, acquiring an entirely new overall meaning. To the extent that public art has an impact on the urban environment and therefore on contemporary human lifestyles, aesthetics cannot avoid being confronted with it, since «despite its many flaws, despite the utilitarian component that necessarily invalidates its “absolute” value, this art [represents] one of the crucial elements of that evolution of taste for which our age is so thirsty» (Dorfles [2002⁴]: 163; my translation).

Artists have conceived and implemented a growing number of “projects” that seek to enter the social fabric as an active (or rather hyperactive) probe, better than others at capturing and deciphering the oscillations and degenerations typical of the contemporary world, in an attempt to create a positive and oppositional countermovement. This is essentially the spirit in which the proponents of *relational art* and *public art* perform their work. This tendency, which has generically anthropological and sociological connotations, prompts contemporary artists to make their message as ethical as it aesthetic, foregrounding the need to achieve ever better communication with the spectator-consumers. The new horizons of today’s art allow us to imagine a new relationship between aesthetics and art, whose point of convergence is no longer “beauty”, but rather the need to understand the present and give expression to contemporary human beings’ need for sharing, sociality and global wellbeing.

Public art – which aims to reconstruct an authentic and free relationship between individuals, but also between human beings and the environment, between the anthropic and natural dimensions⁴ – remains an extremely rich topic to explore. Cher Krause Knight and Harriet F. Senie (2016: 5) explain how the outcomes that public art aims to achieve are the subject of attention in anthropology, sociology, architecture, landscape design and urban planning. However, they neglect to mention philosophy and aesthetics, forgetting that the philosophical analysis of public art is crucial in the current historical phase.

By eco-aesthetics, then, we mean: 1) the aesthetic reflection that focuses on the expressive forms of relational art and public art that have as their main objective a critique of the current industrial and economic planetary order; 2) the poetics and aesthetic thought of those artists who thematise the environmental crisis, the pollution of the planet and the risks to the survival of humans; 3) aesthetics as a philosophical discipline

⁴ Recently, Marco Petroni (2022) has reflected on these issues in relation to the work of contemporary designers.

that confers a new orientation on our relationship with the natural environment.

It is not a question of reflecting on land art (which promotes «an immediate dialogue with nature: not *on* nature, but *in* it», Trione [2022]: 80; my translation), but on public art with an ecological character. As Trione points out, many artists have placed ecological issues at the centre of their artistic research: Olafur Eliasson (*The Weather Project*), Joe Davis (*Bacterial Radio*), Francois Knoetz (*Cape Mongo*), Paolo Bay and Armando Bruni (*Reliquaries*) and Antonio García Abril and Débora Mesa (*Petrified River*). The ecological dimension is now central, perhaps exceeding what public artists can actually achieve. There are clearly unrealistic expectations concerning the long-term impact that a single public art project can have on a community. As Cameron Cartiere writes, «Great public art will not correct bad social policy. Some community problems result from deeply systemic governmental shortcomings, and while challenging public art can certainly highlight those problematic issues, it is not a substitute for direct civic engagement between policy makers and the communities they serve» (Cartiere [2016]: 460).

Such an approach emerges in Malcolm Miles' volume *Eco-Aesthetics. Art, Literature and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* (2014). The author explains in the introduction how difficult it is to maintain a neutral position. Writing about certain topics means «being pulled between hope and despair: hope that a better world is possible; despair that it will be in my lifetime, or that art, literature and architecture can do a great deal to realize it» (ivi: 1). One has the impression that we no longer have time to intervene: climate change is no longer a prediction, but a dramatic reality, and its effects have left the reports of scientists and become a tragic everyday occurrence. Faced with this situation, talking about art might seem a waste of time. However, 1) the aesthetic dimension arising from our relationship with public art can produce unexpected and extremely fruitful results; 2) beyond its degenerations, whether financial or hyper-mundane, art has begun to function once again as a compass for orienting

ourselves in the present time and as a tool for intervening. Miles, however, makes it clear that by «eco-aesthetics» he does not mean a new specialisation within philosophy (which I consider desirable). Although Miles does not neglect to mention Bourriaud and Rancière, in the chapter on aesthetics he dwells on Baumgarten, Kant and Goethe in particular, focusing on the theme of «colour theory» and the relationship to nature. However, eco-aesthetics could also be built on a theorisation of the aesthetic relationship and experience as «experience-with», within a framework that sees aesthetics as a field that has boundaries and connotations that go far beyond those of the «artistic». Such an aesthetics places the characters and structure of aesthetic experience beyond «obsolete, pathetic and embarrassing (aporetic) partitions» (Desideri [2018]: 15; my translation), and looks at the more advanced forms of public art with renewed interest. Clearly, this proposal deserves broader treatment, of which this article could be the starting point. After all, as Umberto Eco wrote, analysing a problem does not mean solving it: it can only mean clarifying its terms to make a deeper discussion possible.

We were saying how by eco-aesthetics we also mean the philosophical approach of aesthetics to our relationship with the natural environment. Although extremely relevant to aesthetic reflection over the last twenty years, I do not now intend to dwell on so-called «environmental», «natural» or «ecological» aesthetics⁵. Instead, I intend to recover two elements: a) the essential universal character of the interrelationship; b) the fundamentally aesthetic character of our relationship with the world, and thus also with nature.

Regarding the first element, as I mentioned in the second paragraph, Enzo Paci emphasises that history, like nature, is an «organic» entity, structured in terms of relations. Human existence is perfectly embedded in this dense universal web of relations, the deciphering of which, accord-

⁵ See Berleant (1992, 1998); Berleant, Carlson (1998, 2004); Carlson (1992, 2000); Fischer (2003); Toadvine (2010); Feloj (2018).

ing to Whitehead, requires not just logic, science and their languages, but also, and above all, an *aesthetic dimension*. The organic relationship that binds events together is manifested in its aesthetic depth from the moment that events enter the concrete perceptive experience of man and hence lived experience, the *Lebenswelt*. From Whitehead's perspective, feeling plays a particularly important role because it guarantees that both existence and philosophy will continue to enjoy the maintenance of that necessary contact with the lived experience of reality and nature that can only come from the "perceptible". The history of the world (and the history of man) is not the history of categories, abstract models or theoretical schemes detached from reality: rather, it is a series of relationships and events perceived, felt and experienced.

The fundamental problem of philosophy, therefore, becomes that of finding an organic unification that can clarify the connecting relationship between the various fields of current experience (characterised by disorder and disorganisation), its "feelings" and the need to consider the "senses" as relational complexes which, as such, are connected to nature and the rest of the universe.

Regarding the second element, another theoretical aspect of this possible eco-aesthetics brings us back to the idea of aesthetics understood as the «analytical-material phenomenology of the perceptible compagination» (Matteucci [2019]: 112; my translation). Giovanni Matteucci's theoretical proposal represents a new approach to the topic of aesthetic experience that is based on the distinction between two paradigms: «experience-of» and «experience-with». According to the «experience-of» model, all human experience is traced back to an oppositional relationship – basically Descartes' – between the two horizons of subjectivity and objectivity. In contrast, the «experience-with» model emphasises the relational character of experience, which is first and foremost an interaction between the organism and its surrounding environment, endowed with its own structures and modalities. Only by taking this point of view will

it be possible to understand aesthetic processes as immersive practices «serving primarily not to define concepts but to perceive and feel, not to elaborate theories about the world but to develop environmental interaction» (Matteucci [2019]: 12; my translation).

While pointing out that the paradigm of «experience-with» acquires its conceptual value in its combination with the model of the "extended mind" and with a certain definition of "human nature", we may conclude – provisionally – by emphasising how one of the articulations of eco-aesthetics might find useful support in Matteucci's proposal. This is because the «experience-with» model, applied to our relationship with the natural environment, would help overcome the traditional and conflicting relationship with nature based on the idea of domination, control and exploitation.

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