

# Chapter 6

## The Sublime in Relational Art: Meaning-Making Processes on the Move



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### Cultural Psychology and New Perspectives on Human Development

Cultural Psychology has been increasingly viewed as a multidisciplinary field on the borders of psychology, semiotics, and cultural studies focusing on how individuals make their experiences meaningful (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014). With that thought in mind, it is the purpose of this chapter to use a theoretical approach in aesthetics to discuss meaning-making processes in human trajectories, in other words, to link aesthetics to a developmental approach in Cultural Psychology.

We have previously acknowledged a change of theoretical perspective (Lordelo, 2017), identifying, in Cultural Psychology, a challenging, but highly productive, concept of development. Robinson and Freeman (1990) have, now a few decades ago, argued that the idea of development (expanding its focus on childhood and especially considering adulthood) has been generally conceived in terms of already prescribed ends, as in normative models, or in terms of complete absence of ends. In contrast, the authors suggest development to be better conceived in terms of progressive transformation of ends (Robinson & Freeman, 1990). The idea of progressive transformation of ends is consonant with recent claims of cultural psychologists: they have been conceiving development as the property of open systems to undergo qualitative transformations, under constant relating with the environment within irreversible time (Zittoun et al., 2013). Flexibility and open-endedness are crucial characteristics of that developmental process, and they are guaranteed by a shift in perspective: for Valsiner (2008), the reliance on an ontological discourse, both in psychology and in education, is misfitting. We must move from the static *ontology of being*, which asks “what is X?,” to the *epistemology of becoming*, which asks

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“what is X becoming,” or yet, “how is X becoming Y?” or “how is X changing?” This is the question which characterizes the very own nature of development. Once we start to deal with that problem, not only will we view development in a less normative, programmed way, but we will also need to think of different techniques and methods to study it, as well as theories to describe it.

In that change of perspective, two processes become central to human development: meaning-making and imagination (Zittoun et al., 2013). Meaning-making is the expression of what we could refer to as a semiotic function basic to human beings. Zittoun and colleagues claim that, although other animals are able to coordinate themselves, “the phylogenetic development of the semiotic abilities allowed humans to develop culture (art and science), representations of the future,” and more sophisticated forms of coordination (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 03). Through that semiotic function, we are able to interact with the environment in a mediated way – this means we are able to go beyond the linearity of the here-and-now (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 03). To put that semiotic function in very simple terms, it is to say that “as we *react to* and *act upon* the world in the middle of which we live, we construct it as *meaningful for ourselves*” (Valsiner, 2014). In strict relation to that process, those complex semiotic abilities, together with the existence of cultural artifacts and semiotic systems inherited throughout generations, enable humans to develop a unique capacity for imagination. Imagination, here, is generally conceived as a constant process of expansion of the present, along three dimensions – time, space, and degrees of reality (Zittoun et al., 2013).

## **Relational Aesthetics: The Work of Brazilian Artist Wagner Schwartz**

Taking into account this developmental perspective, I wish to explore a theoretical perspective in aesthetics – Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics – which takes into account both artists and audience, as they relate personally, particularly affectively relate to works of art. Art researcher and curator Nicolas Bourriaud has dedicated himself to studying artists and their practices which have been, mainly since the second half of the twentieth century, consciously engaging in learning to “inhabit the world in a better way” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13); in these practices, people are not only pointing at or forming utopian realities but actually being these ways of living and models of action within existing reality.

Bourriaud’s theorizing refers to a paradigmatic shift in artistic practices which can be simply called relational art – from the early 1960s on, works of art in which the spectator’s participation became central, such as performances, installations, happenings, and so on (Glusberg, 2009; Bishop, 2006). Relational art, according to the author, points to an upheaval of the aesthetic, political, and cultural goals introduced by modern art (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14). If up to the beginning of the twentieth century, a modern accomplishment of art theoreticians and thinkers within the field of aesthetics and history of art would have been precisely its independent status – art

as a field of knowledges and practices with their own theories, distinctions, and laws of functioning – from that moment on, artists would have begun to defy that very status, by questioning some conventional understandings, such as the notion of individual geniuses, the distance between artist and public, and the idea that art should depict or represent reality exactly as it was. Provoked by that crisis of the representational paradigm, artists and theoreticians locate, at the first decades of the twentieth century, a deep transformation in the arts (Benjamin, 2013), reorganizing the distinction among artistic languages and mainly witnessing the birth of new artistic expressions.

More than straightening the gap between audience and artists, for relational art works, the spectator's "participation" becomes the core of a work of art; and consequently, intersubjectivity becomes the very essence of artistic practice (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 22). In a broader sense, he claims, the artist starts to concentrate on inventing new models of sociability (p. 28).

A series of artists have worked under this kind of inspiration; in Brazil, visual artist Lygia Clark<sup>1</sup> (1920–1988) was one of our most prominent figures within that aesthetic paradigm. Clark arose from Brazilian neoconcretist visual arts movement to progressively relational works, such as "Caminhando"<sup>2</sup> (1963), in which she proposed that the spectator, already co-authoring the piece, created, from a piece of paper, a Moebius strip and cut it in all its extension, allowing him/her to live the experience of continuity between inside and out.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, she created a series called "relational objects," when she took participation to a more radical degree. In one of her letters to fellow artist Hélio Oiticica, she confesses, "the object for me has lost its significance, and if I still use it, it is so that it becomes a mediator for participation (Clark & Oiticica, 2006, p. 110). To this series, belong, for example, the "grande colchão" (big mattress), a great translucent mattress full of Styrofoam on which a person would lie, until his/her body would be "conform" to the surface and a group of small plastic bags containing different elements such as water, air, pebbles, and so on be manipulated by people, one person at a time.

Lygia Clark slowly radicalized the relational nature of her works, actually becoming a therapist and doing clinical work during the 1980s (Rolnik, 1997). Now, many Brazilian artists have been strongly influenced by Clark's work. In particular, we will look into contemporary artist Wagner Schwartz, born in 1972, and his piece *La Bête*.

Born in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Schwartz's works are much influenced by literature, problematizing the experiences of the foreigner between languages, cultures, cities, and institutions through a task he defines as "the dramaturgy of migration" (Bio, 2017). Schwartz has been using compositions of texts, sounds, and images to show clearly the physicality of his experiments. In *La Bête*, the artist takes

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<sup>1</sup>Lygia Clark is an internationally acknowledged Brazilian artist and had a great retrospective exhibition of her works in MOMA – Museum of Modern Art – in New York, in 2014. The exhibition was called *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*.

<sup>2</sup>"Caminhando": walking, in Portuguese.

a replica of a sculpture from Lygia Clark's series *Bichos* (Creatures, 1960). While in Clark's sculptures geometrical metal constructions are articulated by hinges which require the spectator's participation, in Schwartz's dance piece, the creature replica is manipulated by the artist, who also puts himself, through his naked body, up to manipulation by the public.

Schwartz evokes the experiential dimension of Clark's works, by embodying one of her multidimensional, malleable creatures – not in metal but now in flesh and blood. Multiple creator-creature relations are inverted and resignified in this manipulation game. And the piece happens in its potentiality and strength precisely when this situation is activated.

It is exactly in this period of time, in this duration, that the work of art must present itself in a relational approach; it must present itself as “an opening to unlimited discussion” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 15). In that sense, the objects exposed in that relational performance – the paper creature and the human creature – are only initial pretexts for what is going to take place. The work of art is exactly this: something that takes place or something that happens between people.

## **Aesthetic and Developmental Approaches: Interconnections**

As we have learned from sociocultural, dialogical approaches in psychology (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, 2001; Rosa & Valsiner, 2007; Valsiner, 2007), it is mainly through that interaction that semiosis occurs. Semiosis is the human process of creating signs, in order to make sense of the reality that surrounds us. That ability to interact with the environment (cultural artifacts and people included) in a mediated way enables us, as already mentioned (see first section of this paper), to go beyond the linearity of the here-and-now (Zittoun et al., 2013, p. 03). As we have also seen, in Cultural Psychology, this also constitutes an approach to human development.

Looking at a contemporary aesthetic phenomenon as the art piece *La Bête* produces some theoretical dislocations in our previous aesthetic understandings. Valsiner (2018) traces the origins of modern aesthetic thinking to the eighteenth century, particularly with the notion of disinterested affect – the idea that we can appreciate something from a distance, without relating to it in any functional way – just for the pleasure of experiencing the beautiful. It is from the works of philosophers such as Edmund Burke (1729–1797), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) that philosophical aesthetics was conceived and developed as a separate domain. These efforts led to a distinction between the mundane and the aesthetic – and its transitional zone, the sublime.

The sublime in Schwartz's *La Bête* is actualized in the interaction between artist and audience. And Valsiner's question “under which conditions could the sublime become beautiful, and, conversely—under what conditions could the beautiful become sublime?” (this book, Chap. 5) is looked at under different conditions. In a relational work of art, nothing is disinterested. It is perhaps genuine participation

during the artistic work which constitutes the main condition of transit. Participation is the locus of the sublime.

To claim that participation is the locus of the sublime leads to a specific developmental implication: once we acknowledge, within that approach, that art pieces exist as actions and more especially as interactions between artists and audiences, they become central tools for the continuous constitution and transformation of our selves. They impact our trajectories just like so many other everyday experiences and move us into taking decisions and heading ourselves into our future.

## Concluding Thoughts

Far from a semiotic analysis of a work of art, this text aimed to propose articulations between aesthetic and cultural developmental approaches, through the outline of a contemporary aesthetic theory grounded on the principles of participation and social interaction – Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics – showing such principles through the case of an art piece by a contemporary Brazilian artist, Wagner Schwartz.

Working under the framework of relational aesthetics makes us stand precisely on the transitional point where the artist’s piece can be considered something mundane and, at the same time, profoundly beautiful and poetic. The notion of the work of art must present itself as “an opening to unlimited discussion,” as Bourriaud puts it (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 15), which enables the existence of that transitional space. And, as Valsiner himself reminds us, in opposition of the ontological, categorical mode of thinking of the eighteenth-century philosophy (this book, Chap. 5), what is at stake here is a developmental approach to aesthetic phenomena, centered in that potential transformational relation. Standing on the transition is cultivating the sublime, for it is when and where multiple possible meanings are constructed by us and can push us onto different developmental directions, depending on people’s goals and the surrounding context. The sublime is the meaning-making process on the move.

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