

# Esthetics of a dialogue

Some thoughts  
to attend ResidenzaLAB

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## Imagine

How can we connect different realities to facilitate dialogue? The question is always contemporary. Dialogue is the encounter between two or more intelligences. Its cultivation and evolution are central to ResidenzaLAB, a research station and publication laboratory.

I am interested in constructive dialogues and collaborative thinking, intentionally crafted as an open work of art. Works - or shall we call them settings? - which invite to openness, a spirit of receptivity and getting ready to exchange ideas. The core of my research is the agency to cure, heal and evolve. I behold the art practices

developed as tools that evoke collaboration and sharing. They will be integral parts of creating an open repository of dialogue practices during ResidenzaLAB.

I see art as a locus of relationships and processes and frame aesthetics as sensitive perception experiences. Further, proposing dialogues universally embracing different realities is possible. I write this essay by looking at art practices that connect reality with reality and thought with thought.

## Junk everywhere

The nature of relational practice is that artworks are open and building themselves by the exchange of ideas and thoughts, like the mental space, which is constantly forced to move within its social context. Therefore, relational art practice occurs by working with existing realities, and their aesthetics is the sharing by a community. These art forms have a history; we encounter them, for example, in the Fluxus movement with *Make a Salad* (1962) by Alison Knowles.

Artist Maria Lai collaborated with the community of Ulassai in Sardinia in 1981 to create the artwork "Legarsi alla Montagna" (Tying Oneself to the Mountain). This project was inspired by a local legend in which a young girl survived a rock slide following a celestial ribbon that appeared in the air. Lai's vision was to connect all the houses in Ulassai to the mountain using ribbons.

Three days of preparation and nearly 30 kilometres of celestial ribbon were needed to bring this vision to life. However, the material aspect presented minimal challenges in comparison. Surprisingly or not, the primary concern among the residents of Ulassai revolved around emotional engagement. Witnessing themselves connected by ribbons to families and people

with whom they hadn't spoken in years, with whom there was mute distrust or were unfamiliar, seemed an unnecessary madness.

Years later, in 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud wrote about artistic practices rooted in the entirety of human relationships and their social embeddedness. The artist does not occupy a central position in the work. Instead, they serve as catalysts or facilitators. „A definition that ideally applies to the practices of contemporary artists: by creating and staging devices of existence including working methods and ways of being, instead of concrete objects which hitherto bounded the realm of art, they use time as a material”.<sup>1</sup> Participation and comportment were the keywords of these practices in the 1990s.

Following the release of Bourriaud's book, Grant H. Kester<sup>2</sup>, in his compelling work *Conversation Pieces*, proposed a further reading on the models of dialogical art projects. In his compendium, he looks back on coexistence and political action with the help of dialogue-based works of art. While he describes examples, he always has all the people involved in mind: In Zurich, at a time when the city was in the throes of visible drug addiction, Shedhalle

commissioned the Viennese artistic collective WochenKlasur to address the pressing issue of the living conditions for homeless, addicted women and sex workers in the city. The art collective decided to use an excursion amusement ship on Lake Zurich as the setting for engaging around 60 experts, from police to social workers, in conversations. The ship embarked from the Zurich dock many times, conducting dozens of consultative tours. After weeks, an understanding was born, and the public administration set up a shelter facility where affected women could rest, sleep, and shower. These dialogues led to further awareness of police and society.

In Oakland, Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacobi and Chris Johnson, on the other hand, in the early nineties, placed several cars on the roof of a high-rise parking garage in which young people of different ethnicities could exchange ideas with white people and the police. By telling their stories, they were able to be themselves and “to take control of their image and to transcend the one-dimensional clichés promulgated by mainstream news and entertainment media”, comments Kester. More than two hundred people met during the first performance. The Oakland Projects took place between 1991 and 2001.

Art exhibitions once again drew attention to the dialogue-based work of art. For example, Okwui Enwezor and his team for *Documenta 11* in 2002 conceived a series of five platforms, only one of which took place as an exhibition in Kassel. The other four consisted of thematic lecture series and discussion rounds and were organised in advance in selected cities worldwide. *Documenta 14* then once again focused on collaboration and exchange. An airline was set up between Athens and Kassel. (The environmental impact of art and culture professionals is another topic I don't want to deal with here, but it will undoubtedly be topical in ResidenzaLAB). It was not until *documenta 15*

in 2022 that the focus returned to dialogue-based artwork.

I will now move on to other examples not conceived as dialogue-based artworks but have become such as a result of the working method:

Meanwhile, artists David Siepert and Stefan Baltensperger engage with the existing realities, such as migration and work. In 2017, a manual was released for individuals weighing up leaving their countries to go on that journey to reach Europe. In interviews with eighteen migrants who left their homelands and arrived in Switzerland, the two artists asked them to provide explicit cautionary advice for those embarking on a similar path. The result is a book in three languages (English, Arabic, and German) titled *Ways to Escape One's Former Country*. The book was made available to the public free of charge. What emerged from this effort was a heightened consciousness of the subject that encapsulates the arduous journeys endured by numerous individuals, often spanning years. There were only a few critics, one of them in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.<sup>4</sup> To read it is like going on that journey. It should be read at school.

2020, in the short movie *Omelia Contadina*, director Alice Rohrwacher collaborates with photographer and street artist JR. The collaboration unfolds between them and the local farmers of the Alfina plateau, who play a pivotal role in interpreting a funeral ritual in the space that is their land. The procession, accompanied by the village band, converges around the symbolic figures of concerned farmers.

JR first photographed them, and then the photo was transferred onto fabric. A drone filmed the aerial perspective. The movie is a silent cry, which has perhaps remained unheard by those who should be part of that dialogue too: the farmers who sell their land to corporations, destroying its heritage by planting monocultures.

<sup>1</sup>Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, engl. Edition e-book, p.121

<sup>2</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 1. Edition 2004 University of California Press

<sup>3</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 4, Edizione aggiornata 2013, University of California Press

<sup>4</sup> NZZ am Sonntag, 2.8.2018, Sieglinde Geisel: Nimm das dritte Boot. (Take the third boat.)

## Conversation Pieces

Only through networking and dialogue can the community advance its project, namely the community. My interest in dialogue in the ResidenzaLAB project stems from the idea that the images or designs of a changing world must be

taken into everyone's hands as democratically as possible and that even beings with no voice must be respected and included. Therefore, listening, learning, and creating space for collaborative thinking is necessary. I address these

thoughts to collaborations in the near future to invent, try out and discuss dialogue practices. This action should lead to further conscious reflection and change to create an open source accessible to all organisations and individuals interested in such questions.

To do this, we need to ask:

**How can people from different walks of life and realities interact with each other?**

**What can we talk about?**

**What framework conditions can we formulate for collaborative thinking?**

**What settings can we build?**

**When and how can we involve people interested in what is being discussed?**

**What questions inspire collaborative thinking?**

**And how can we document the dialogues to make them open source with good practices?**

In the ResidenzaLAB research station and pu-

blication laboratory project, I included all uncertainties that I found stimulating. This also includes the topic of language and its hybridisation. They result from cultures that have been approaching each other for centuries and, at least in words, are adapting or merging. Looking directly at things and circumstances and clarifying the meaning of words is therefore central. To paraphrase Aldous Huxley: "We must learn to use words effectively, but at the same time, we must preserve and, if necessary, strengthen our ability to look at the world directly and not through the opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every fact into the all-too-familiar guise of a general label or explanatory abstraction".<sup>5</sup>

Art knows how to create and maintain the space of the imaginary by listening to stories to understand the signs and paths that lead from the emotional moment to the experience, to the formulation of the complexity of the whole so that one can begin to clarify, understand or discuss them. Artists can play a crucial role in creating space that forms the basis for creative dialogues and transcends boundaries of categorisation.

<sup>5</sup>Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, p. 47, Edition Penguin Random House 2004, first published in 1954

## Setting

"We have to think! We must think!" In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway<sup>6</sup> repeats this call to action, which consists of the formulated but difficult act of thinking together with others. But how does that work? Thinking together?

Every dialogue needs a container, a space or an environment, time, silence or sounds: when walking together, the place is defined by territory and time. Opening up to another person by not always looking them in the eye differs from standing or sitting in front of them. Calling each other with or without video is a different quality. Meeting in a group can lead to an intense dialogue, depending on how everyone behaves and can open up.

In ResidenzaLAB, I want to see art as a mediator, using its means (video, audio, text, performance, etc.) to seek a beginning, to create an everyday basis in the form of a simple action. This can be a simple action developed when coming together or in the form of an unusual assignment given to everyone before the meeting. It is always about preparing for the momentum at which a dialogue will have been intentionally set

in motion. This will also involve setting up a space in an existing structure, such as on the roof of a car park (see *The Oakland Projects*), or adapting a space. In this endeavour, it will always be important for everyone to know that no conversation can be planned, only the circumstances, and not even these in detail. All of this requires openness towards the random, the ambiguous, the processual and the inexhaustible.

For the basis of a dialogue to be developed, it needs the desire for exchange. This is part of a setting and cannot be planned but only be experienced by endeavouring to establish a relationship. Baltensperger and Siepert approached people directly to gradually learn from them essential passages of their escape, which they pass on in the book. Maria Lai spoke to all the Ulassesi to convince them of the connection to their nearest neighbours. *WochenKlausur* even had to use tricks to involve those who needed to be involved. In addition to involving people willing to cooperate, the region in which you operate also plays an important role. It matters whether this is in the city, on the outskirts, in a provincial town, in the mountains, in the hills

or on the coast. Not because one place is better than the other, but because it influences the being in its daily choices, i.e. how one pays attention or not to the things that have to do with one's life, including the things one suffers from or no longer sees because one has become accustomed to seeing and suffering them. Ursula K. Le Guin says that the spirit of a place is crucial to life, much more than race or origin.<sup>7</sup>

Is the seashore a suitable meeting place for collective thinking?

This setting is generally an opportunity to open the mind and look out/back to the clear and organised horizon. Perhaps to spread out towards it, see more, think dynamically and not

systematically, but maybe become an island in the great archipelago of regions and languages. Édouard Glissant<sup>8</sup> is the thinker of the archipelagic thinking. It is about seeing the world as a whole by seeing oneself as an island, which always concerns a group of islands because it would not exist without them. Archipelagic thinking has the ability to expand in the archipelago, perhaps to approach the other islands uncertainly, even exploring and simultaneously observing the big picture at the same time, chaotic as it is. This consciousness is intuitive and capable of becoming a link in an archipelago and simultaneously part of a larger time, a larger space.

<sup>6</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, German: *Unruhig bleiben*, p. 60 ff, Ausgabe 2014, Campus Frankfurt a. M.

<sup>7</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Am Anfang war der Beutel*, p. 36, (transl. Sibylle Ciarloni)

<sup>8</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetica della Relazione*, 1990 Gallimard, 2007 Quodlibet Macerata (trad. Sibylle Ciarloni)

## Who acts

Art creates relationships between different or very different things and people. If dialogue only becomes a reality through an artistic medium, it is because there are irrational boundaries or a lack of participation. Art can bring about openness. I would like to add a thought from Franz Xaver Baier<sup>9</sup>, who said about the importance of art for people: "Civilization organises the coexistence of people, animals and all the things we surround ourselves with. And yet, it also limits us. We repeatedly come up against boundaries, walls, laws, predetermined constitutions and taboos. However, the feeling of unknown vastness and bubbling chaos is within us, and it is our first constitution. If we do not experience this vastness and subsoil in ourselves, we try at least to participate in it somehow. That is why there are ( arts,) literature, music, and cinema with films in which a more primordial, powerful, dangerous life breaks boundaries and shows an elemental state of being. It is the struggle between the visible, clear, and dictated reality

and a lush, random, ambiguous, inexhaustible, and chthonian reality."

Many people are looking for clarity, for order. This need arises when confidence in the future is rather low because the promises of a better future do not materialise but instead turn into fear or flight. Living and caring for things also means getting tangled up in contradictions or wavering back and forth between different polarisations. Taking up or imitating positions may help you know which side you are on in conflicts or elections or how you should dress. Without dialogue, however, one does not live with one's ideas but instead in a self-made singularity influenced by the information, monologues and images surrounding us. This raises the question of who is acting.

We are called upon - in art and elsewhere - to be aware of our motivations when we create relationships that want to lead to agreement or joint action.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Xaver Baier, *Der Raum*, capitolo *Der weite Raum – Chaos, Kosmos, Uroffenheit*, *Großes Hemd*, Köln, 2000. (trad. Sibylle Ciarloni)

## Aesthetics of Dialogues

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud reflects on relational aesthetics as an art form that creates temporary convivial moments in small groups and experiences of interpersonal relationships. It is thus a participatory art form in which the focus is not on the artistic object

produced but on the open interaction processes. He speaks, for example, of a work by Rirkrit Tiavanija, who, in the 1990s, cooked Thai dishes and served them to the public in Galleries and Museums. With this act, the artist created a situation of exchange and openness

to his kitchen and a dialogue. He created a setting, among other things, with smell and taste. Relational art does not work with a frame but with an open circle - like the available form of the letter C of Culture, Conversation, Sharing, and Collaboration.

Bourriaud declared the traditional art forms of the 20th and 21st centuries obsolete. Today, we know that all art forms are close to each other, perhaps at a fruitful distance - despite the different motivations - that want to be respected as such.

Participatory and relational art, also known as dialogue art or dialogue-based artwork, aims to collaborate in shaping the future. That is what it is there for. "We need forms of conversation that reflect the contexts of violence from which our societies have emerged and that promote the negotiation of new concepts of the world," as said by Bernd Scherer, outgoing director of Haus der Kulturen der Welt, at the end of his curatorial term in December 2022 in Berlin.

Creating dialogue is an action in which agents try to talk about something that eventually returns

the effects of stimulating consensus or dissent and their respective nuances, such as learning a different point of view or how to rethink things together. The aesthetic perception of the participants in the discussion can include the feeling of having learnt something, as well as the disillusionment of not having found a common idea to build on. It is all unpredictable, chaotic, and, because of that, creative. The resulting perception is priceless, and yet it has value.

Intentionally provoked dialogue is an ephemeral act and builds up and decays with each word spoken unless it is recorded. Documentation is an assessment to be understood and stipulated before.

Documentation also involves an evaluation that is yet to be made, but without which it is hardly possible. We know this from the observations of early explorers and their stays in other communities. What they report in writing, drawing or photography is perceived and described through the individual lens of the observer. Awareness of a record influences behaviour, but it can also drive a process of thinking beyond one's own boundaries.

## "Relational intelligence is the key of social wellbeing"<sup>10</sup>

The appreciation of tangible dialogue has hardly developed in the civilised world. The word is used for many things, especially for short sentences.

How can people from different realities find a dialogue with each other? Can people perhaps learn from plant societies?

Art can help find new visions and interact with different realities because this is part of its abilities that can participate in developing relational intelligence. The ability to co-create the world is given to all living beings. So is the ability to perceive each other. In the performance *The Artist is Present*, Marina Abramovic presents herself as a mute vis-à-vis. She only looks at the person sitting across from her. It is a profound experience for those surrounded by her gaze. It testifies strong emotion for the attention given to her person, without anyone having to explain themselves, but only because they exist.

Many artistic and curatorial initiatives that have set up meetings and workshops<sup>11</sup> for interaction between different forms of expression and realities in recent years bear witness to a departure into new conversations and formats. One hears the voices of artists, publishers, collectors, curators, and finds efforts that promote transition, dematerialisation and democratisation at the base of the topics. In his current essay, *Bonaventure Ndikung*<sup>12</sup>, the new curator of the Haus der Kulturen in Berlin, discusses the concept of language, the chaotic, the pidgin, storytelling and agency as a link between one's roots and stories and being in the world. After thought, language is a direct instrument for dialogue. It transports thoughts and is able to formulate things or the whole, with the aim of reaching a new starting point together.

<sup>10</sup> Esther Perel, Podcaster - Masterclass

<sup>11</sup> Lumbung-concept by Ruangrupa, Deep listening by Pauline Oliveiros

<sup>12</sup> Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *Pidginization as Curatorial Method: Messing with Languages and Praxes of Curating*, 2023, Sternberg Press