INTERSTICES

Josephine Regan

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the elusive nature of human subjectivity by bringing together three separate texts and placing concepts alongside each other from different authors and areas of knowledge.

The areas of knowledge include science, philosophy and art theory, and their shared concepts include the biological foundation of human consciousness; the formation of self and reality through shared language and cultural production; and the integral nature of the biological, psychological, social and cultural human being with the "other" of world. Each author approaches the topic from a particular professional discourse, using very different language and concepts. In order to conserve these varied identities and points of difference each text is presented here separately, so that readers may discern the overlaps and layer the three together for themselves to find the interstices between the texts.

My interest lies with the links across spaces rather than with contoured objects. Whilst the common subject might seem to be the human being, it is not the contoured human being of psychology, economics and legal responsibility; it involves a more dispersed conception of reciprocal self-with-other, subject-with-society, and shared language, culture and reality.

The first text discussed in this essay is the result of collaboration between Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (biologist, and cognitive scientist/epistemologist respectively), authors of *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*.[1] They write that the only reality known to humans is a jointly created cultural reality that is produced through a socially evolved and shared language, rather than through any material reality "out there". The second text is from Paul Crowther, writing on aesthetics in *Art and Embodiment: from Aesthetics to Self-consciousness*.[2] He introduces the concept of "ontological reciprocity" as the reciprocally interactive nature of self and environment, and he discusses art as a "need" of human psychology, assisting us to "see our inner life reflected in, and acknowledged by" the world.[3] The third text is Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*[4] and engages with his eponymous concept, where he describes contemporary art as social practice, concerned with "the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt".[5] Relational art extends the traditional avant-garde critique of society into a proactive search for new ways of knowing and being, and of re-inventing subjectivity.

"reality" as jointly and culturally created: how to survive, and how to change the world?

In *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, Varela and Maturana introduce the concept of *autopoiesis*, meaning a self-sustaining system. All living forms are *autopoietic systems,* from the single cell through to complex mammals, because they all maintain their biological unity within an environment by replacing their own components. To not do so would be to die. Autopoiesis is therefore a definition of life, and describes the continuous adaptive activities and modifications that all living things must constantly perform in order to stay alive within an environment. Maturana and Varela take this discussion well beyond self-organisation at the biological level however, extending it through the social behaviour of various species to the emergence of human consciousness, language and culture. From this they draw two main conclusions: one, that the only *reality* we as humans can know is a cultural reality; we have no direct access to any sort of external reality. Two, that the only reality we can have is a *shared reality*, constructed with others, through language. There is no such thing as a human reality that is not shared.

For Varela and Maturana, evolution is wrongly understood as "*survival of the fittest*", with its implications of competition and violent struggle in a hostile environment.[6] An organism is in fact not separate from its environment. It is integral to it, and both the organism and environment have evolved together, and would not have evolved as they did without each other. The environment, however, does not directly influence an organism's activities. Environmental change may *trigger* a reaction in an organism, but the type of reaction is determined solely by the organism. It must react adaptively to an environmental trigger (or *perturbation*), or it will fail to survive. This replaces the combative understanding of survival with a *conservation of adaptation* which is not intentionally competitive, and living entities establish a *structural coupling* with their environment, constantly seeking to adapt, rather than struggling against it.[7]

From the point of view of the organism, any "other" beyond itself is part of the environment – and perturbations from other organisms cause reactions similar to environmental perturbations. Mutually congruent structural adaptations therefore occur between living beings, at all levels and in many ways, from the cellular to the social. Coupling occurs minute-by-minute in the living organism in response to the complexities and temporality of its lived experience, including multiple, barely noticeable changes such as movements or moods.

This conservation of adaptation leads to the formation of relationships and groups. In the case of simple organisms, cells may either establish symbiotic relationships, or become a structural part of a larger shared organism, both of which create shared benefits. In a similar way the social behaviour of animal and human groups assists both the individual and the group. Organisms and societies are therefore considered to belong to a single class of *metasystems*, the main feature of which is the stability of this larger *unity* in an environment. *Conservation of adaptation* now occurs at the level of this more complex unity or system, as well as within the individual organism.[8]

This ongoing *conservation of adaptation* causes a *structural drift* in the organism or the system, by which progressive adaptive changes take a particular direction. In humans, the plasticity of a complex nervous system has extended structural drift to the development of language. One might ask why only humans would develop this particular, extraordinary drift, and the reason given is the nature of early human groups, whose *natural drift*[9] had already led them to develop more open group structures than other primates, with more opportunity for individual mobility within and between them. These loose social groupings found the coordination of cooperative group behaviour more difficult, leading to a natural drift towards language.[10] Linguistic behaviour is therefore a form of structural coupling, and the primary purpose of words is the conservation of adaptation through coordination of behaviour; the word's meaning is only secondary. However, beginning as a mode of coordinating action, language became a mode for describing and reflecting on that action, because the categories that were developed to assist in group activities became the categories through which the external world was understood. These categories constitute culture. They also resulted in consciousness, because to reflect or to speak, one must have an "I" from which to do so. The increasing complexities of language led to the development of a *linguistic environment*, in which individuals must also survive, so that structural coupling must also be practised within the language environment. Language itself became "a refined choreography of behavioural coordination".[11]

Since language is said to generate consciousness, it is also said to generate mind; because mind is socially constructed through language and does not simply reside within an individual brain. The identity and perceptions of an individual are constructed socially through language, so that a sense of self, as well as the world or "other", are socially constructed through language. The result is that the reality we know is one entirely *brought forth* in coexistence with others.[12] Language has become the environment in which we live, creating our reality, and we do not have access to any unmediated, external, objectively observable world. We have no external point of reference from which to view a reality, and the only world that we have is the one that we *bring forth* together in language, through the actions of our coexistence.

Maturana's and Varela's conclusion is that the only method of survival on this planet is to engage in structural coupling – which must include social as well as other environmental coupling. The authors state that to co-exist with others, each has to accept the other's truth as being equally legitimate and valid – or we negate the other and are failing to couple. We are unavoidably engaged together constantly in "*bringing forth a world*" through the process of living: a world which will only become different from what it now is if we jointly live it differently.[13]

human "being" as self and otherness: art for survival, and as a meeting place for embodied minds

In his book *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, Paul Crowther presents two main concepts. The first is *ontological reciprocity*, which concerns the issue of a subject's relationship to the other/world. The second is the suggestion that art is the most effective means of expressing and recording human embodied experience and ontological reciprocity, as well as being an important ecological *need* of human consciousness. It should be noted that "art" in this text means "artefacts".

Crowther begins with a notion of human embodiment based on the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He describes the human subject as one amongst other beings and things in the world, with which we are in constant reciprocal interaction. Our embodied condition means that experience is not merely cognitive, but sensory, and we do not merely *gaze out* on the world from within our human form, but *inhere* in the world as embodied subjects. The body with its sensori-motor capacities operates as a *unified field*, which becomes more unified with the development of language and social interactions, and from this, a sense of self and consciousness arises – which "is both stimulated by, and enables us to organise, the spatio-temporal diversity of Otherness".[14] This embodied, sensory relationship with otherness is an "*ontological reciprocity*" – "ontological" as in relating to the nature of "being", and reciprocal with the external other. However, we can never fully understand or grasp this other/reality due to a constant moment-by-moment change, both in the world and in our sensory experience of it, as we engage in continuous reciprocal interactions. There is *always more*.[15]

To complicate this further, Crowther notes that subjective experience also includes many non-immediate experiences, such as memory, ideology, motivation etc.; so that even the simplest experiences are interwoven with non-immediate emotional, rational and cultural elements.

The result is that an *Experience* is actually made up of many different, contributory experiences from various sources and senses, and if any one contributory experience were removed, the overall *Experience* would be a different one. This situation effectively removes human embodied experience from the possibility of analysis, because a philosophical exploration of *ontological reciprocity* will inevitably be a translation of actual embodied experience, through reflective cognition and language. Philosophical analysis and description of sensory experience can only dismember and translate it into something other than itself, so destroying the actual experience.[16]

Crowther considers art to be a partial solution to this difficulty, because art is "the making of symbolically significant form out of, or into, sensuous manifolds".[17] Art, in other words, makes use of, and stimulates, a variety of embodied senses. Art, therefore, is the best method that we have for successful reflection on ontological reciprocity, through using those same sensory modes that were stimulated in the original embodied experience and thus avoiding translation and dismemberment in language. Art, therefore, performs a *conservation* of human embodied experience in material form, enabling a shared experience through art, embodied knowledge of it, as well as through reflection and dialogue.[18]

However, Crowther goes further than this conservation use for art, by also considering art to be an ecological *need* of human beings. Ecology is normally considered to be a biological relationship between an organism and its environment. But in the case of humans, consciousness creates additional psychological needs, so that a balanced and harmonious human relationship with the world must also include the fulfilment of consciousness needs; primarily, a satisfactory sense of self. We need "to see our inner life reflected in, and acknowledged by, Otherness";[19] to recognise others, and to receive recognition from others in return, through an externalisation of self. The making of artefacts, the completion of projects and the shared appreciation of these, are therefore considered to be important elements of human ecology.

The conclusions to be drawn from this text are: that not only does philosophical knowledge need art as a mode of understanding the ontologically reciprocal situation of humanity, but that the embodied subject, which inheres in the world as a *unified sensory field* with a consciousness of self, also needs art for a satisfactory human ecology. Art is able to express the multiple aspects of embodied experience, and the human satisfaction and realisation of "self" through this activity is social and reciprocal, and contributes to reflective activity.

Finally, to combat the perception that he might be proposing a universalising solution in these postmodern times, Crowther writes that historical conditions and cultural attitudes do change, although human beings are structured around biological constants, and "ontological reciprocity itself is the very root condition of human being"; therefore if "certain kinds of artefacts fulfil these needs" we should consider them of "universal significance in the ecology of human experience".[20]

contemporary art as social practice: the proactive search for new ways of knowing, being, and reinventing subjectivity

Bourriaud defines the *Relational Aesthetics* of his book title as: "aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt".[21] He explains that all works of art produce a model of sociability, though works may be more or less democratic. Forms produced in a totalitarian regime are more likely to be closed, with predetermined meaning, while more *democratic* forms will allow dialogue, and meaning is open and formed through interaction with the viewer.[22] Relational art, however, intentionally creates new models of sociability that are not only open to dialogue but include the viewer in the making.

Bourriaud believes that critics have failed to fully appreciate art from the 1990s onwards because they have asked the wrong questions of it. Contemporary art, he writes, is interested in "interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts",[23] which reflect changes in human relationships that are occurring in society. He specifies two (somewhat contradictory) sources for this change: first, change is due to modern technology and capitalist modes of exchange, which have caused relationships to be encountered as *spectacular* representation instead of directly experienced, because relational situations are increasingly imposed upon us or mediated by marketing, purchasing activity and electronic media.[24] This suggests that our sense of community is worse than in past times, with which many writers would not agree. The second reason for relational change is our increased urbanisation, with more intimate living conditions, greater mobility, and the growth of mediating technology creating a "system of intensive encounters".[25]

These changes have led to art forms focused upon inter-subjectivity. Art that previously emerged from an "independent, private symbolic space"[26] is increasingly relational and concerned with the realm of human interactions and its social context. Many contemporary art activities and performances are open-ended and occur in real-time, with the collaboration of viewers or audiences in the formation of the work, not merely as negotiators of meaning, but as participants in the work which would not exist without them. Bourriaud feels that instead of criticising contemporary relational art as a weak and élitist form of social and political comment, it should instead be understood as an attempt to invent models of sociability through *form*.[27]

An example of relational art used by Bourriaud early in the book is by Rirkrit Tiravanija, who has created several impromptu meals within gallery spaces, installing a gas burner and cooking instant Thai soup to share with visitors. Due to its location within the artificial environment of the gallery space, and the usual audience of gallery visitors and collectors, this has been criticised as élitist and failing to address issues of community spirit or alienation in the real world. Bourriaud argues, on the contrary, that the work creates a real affect of community spirit in the moment of its performance, that the conviviality is not the *purpose* of the work; it is the *form* of the work. The work experiments with ways of being together, and with *forms* of interaction and acknowledgement, and as for other works of art the *form* is of primary importance rather than any possible political outcome. The work's location within an art gallery is therefore not inappropriate for the work of art.[28]

Bourriaud notes that there are no forms in nature. Form is entirely created by human society, and what was previously unrecognised develops as form through communication with others.[29] Form produces understanding, and passes it into everyday life,[30] which makes form *relational*, resulting from "perpetual transactions with the subjectivity of others"[31]; "the enemy" he says, "is embodied in a social form", implying that we need to invent new forms, because the supplier/client relationship has spread to every aspect of human life, and "tacit contracts define our private life", as we accept and conform to normalised behaviour and comply with social structures.[32]

Bourriaud's closing chapter references Félix Guattari and his concept of creating new forms of subjectivisation, and intentionally changing our subjectivity as opposed to the usual evolution of change emergent from economic or political conditions. Subjectivity is not created at the individual level, nor is it fixed and unalterable. It is produced

collectively, in human groups, and is affected by changes in context. For changes to occur in contemporary society, new forms of subjectivity must first be collectively produced; and "art is the thing upon and around which subjectivity can reform itself".[33]

Works of art give material quality to existential territories. Relational art simply uses other forms, related to other strategies for existence. All art preserves moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences, but contemporary art expands on the material form by becoming more dynamic. It expands upon the traditional avant-garde project of "transforming attitudes and social structures", attempting to create new ways of living and new modes of understanding. "Nothing is possible without far-reaching ecological transformation of subjectivities".[34]

On the penultimate page of his text, Bourriaud includes a quote from Félix Guattari – with which I will conclude this essay. Guattari writes that "the only acceptable end purpose of human activities is the production of a subjectivity that is forever self-enriching its relationship with the world".[35]

Josephine Regan is a local artist who has recently completed the MFA Programme at Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin, New Zealand.

1 Humberto R Maturana & Francisco J Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1998).
2 Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1993).
3 Ibid., 6.
4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002).
5 Ibid.,112.
6 Maturana & Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, 197.
7 Ibid., 75.
8 Ibid.,198.
9 Ibid.,115.
10 Ibid., 192-3.
11 Ibid., 233.
12 Ibid., 234
13 Maturana & Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, 245.
14 Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, 2.
15 Ibid., 1.
16 Ibid., 3.
17 Ibid., 4.
18 Ibid., 7.
19 Ibid., 6.
20 Ibid., 9.
21 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 112
22 Ibid.,109.
23 Ibid., 8.
24 Ibid., 9.
25 Ibid.,15.
26 Ibid.,14.
27 Ibid., 81 -2.
28 Ibid.,82-3.
29 Ibid.,19-21.
30 Ibid.,83.
31 Ibid.,22.
32 Ibid.,83 -4.
33 Ibid., 97.
34 Ibid.,95.
35 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 103 referencing Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995).