

# Alternative Art and Anthropology

Global Encounters



Edited by Arnd Schneider

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**EDITED BY  
ARND SCHNEIDER**

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# 1

## Alternatives: World ontologies and dialogues between contemporary arts and anthropologies

*Arnd Schneider*

**T**his book is as much about other art as it is about other anthropologies. By bringing together a majority of contributors with backgrounds from outside Euro-America (and its extensions, such as Australia and New Zealand), its aims are to broaden substantially the debate between contemporary art and anthropology, building upon and going beyond what has been, up until very recently, largely a metropolitan conversation.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that some contributors with other backgrounds, and based in different geographic positions from metropolitan centers, were not included in previous attempts.<sup>2</sup> But the vantage point was entirely different, as the assumption had been—rightly or wrongly—that notions of contemporary art and anthropology, even in their variety (but not necessarily cultural or regional differences), were broadly shared in the respective disciplinary arenas, and dialogues thus were traversed by just two participating fields.

The focus in this volume is decidedly distinct, in that it brings *other* traditions of contemporary art and anthropology to the fore and puts them center stage, relying primarily on notions of difference and alterity, and demonstrating the great variation of concepts and approaches proposed elsewhere, or in the felicitous expression of Gerardo Mosquera, “from here.”<sup>3</sup> In some ways, this argument might seem to resemble an older debate about whether the category of art is universal, or culturally specific; or indeed to revisit the more recent discussion on art and globalization, abundantly covered in art critical, art historical, and cultural studies writing.<sup>4</sup> Here, however, the focus stays on art and anthropology, and no solution to the presumed

universal / particular divide is proposed in relation to “contemporary art” and “anthropology,” other than to present and discuss the great range of variation found in the projects in this volume, and to decenter centrally held notions of the two fields. Therefore, a principal theme of the book is the communication of difference across culturally refracted boundaries of disciplines.

Like the stick figures peopling the two rolls of paper in Diego Bertorelli’s artwork “Flujo” (the cover image for this book), there is constant flux between opposites in the play of alterity. The stick figures, of course, are all different from each other, and so are the two rolls of paper between and around which they move. While difference is important and has to be acknowledged, it also folds back onto itself in a perpetual movement—in Bertorelli’s artwork almost resembling the symbol of infinity,  $\infty$ . One way of writing about these new exchanges between art and anthropology on a global scale is to get a feel for the type of movement of the parts in these multiple assemblages of communications, to sense the new qualities and characteristics this unprecedented traffic among art and anthropology involves. Thus difference often is not absolute, can be transgressed and overcome, and indeed made into something new—through translation and interpretation, for example.

Anthropology is perhaps *the* academic discipline that occupies itself with the Other and alterity, certainly empirically in contradistinction to philosophy—but also theoretically, an interest it shares with philosophy. Discussion of otherness goes through the history of anthropology (for instance, cultural relativism in American cultural anthropology, the rationality debate in British social anthropology, or the assumption of a universal, binary logic of the mind in French structuralism). However, it is the recent turn, or revival, of what has been called ontology, where, based on Amerindian and other non-Western cultures, fundamental differences of knowledge acquisition and representation are proposed between Western modes and certain other forms of thought. For instance, Philippe Descola has proposed a fourfold scheme of ontologies (that consists of principles of identification and modes of relation) to understand human cultures, i.e., animism, naturalism, totemism, and analogism (these, in turn, are subdivided into exchange, predation and the gift, and production, protection and transmission).<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, on the other hand, has suggested that the “perspectivism” of Amerindian societies is diametrically opposed to Western multiculturalism (more on this below).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, a proliferation of post-human agency research in anthropology (and beyond) has thoroughly questioned, if not decentered, the idea of an anthro-centric episteme in the Western sense, coupled also with a sense of urgency in view of the global, planetary challenges facing us and which is taken up by some protagonists of the debate—such as in Bruno Latour’s engagement with and extension of Gaia theory, originally proposed by James Lovelock.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps too easily, this might be called a new “animism”<sup>8</sup>—but the catchword is out there, and has been used to some effect also in the art world intervening into these refreshed theoretical debates (of what had been a staple term in anthropology), such as in the *Animism* show curated by Anselm Franke.<sup>9</sup>

Other ontologies, then, have also entered contemporary art in various ways where a number of artists have engaged directly with alterity and epistemes different from



**FIGURE 1.1** Rodrigo Petrella, *Kwot-Kwot* or *Kôkô* (both spellings are valid according to the Kayapó) catfish ritual mask, Kriny community, Pará State, Brazil, October 2010. Color print with mineral pigment on cotton paper. Courtesy of the artist.

the West's. An example of how radical alterity can be communicated, and even "translated," without losing its distinctiveness is the work of photographer Rodrigo Petrella. Petrella originally made a career in fashion photography and since the early 2000s has repeatedly, and for prolonged periods, visited indigenous communities in his native Brazil. Petrella is particularly drawn to the Amerindian peoples of the Amazonian rainforest, and attracted by their body art (especially facial and body painting), feather work, and ritual performance. At first sight, he brings an uncanny familiarity with the human face and body to the job, learned and refined during his earlier career as a fashion photographer. Accusations of aestheticizing and beautifying to the point of exoticism might be the quick and indeed unfair judgment his images could provoke. A second reading, however, reveals something very different. Petrella never invades the otherness of his subjects, but he goes as far as possibly only a former fashion photographer can to make visibly palpable and translate this otherness for the viewer. Facial and body paintings are, of course, similar to a mask, and constitute an existential play with alterity for its wearer (who, for instance, is now shaman, embodying animal spirits, and so forth). As philosopher and art critic Ticio Escobar suggests in his catalog essay, such a person:

becomes someone else in order to recover himself through the disruption of time and the circumvention of alterity. When he goes back to being himself, he is inevitably marked by this difference and split by the dual role that he has had to play in the ritual. [...] Thus, Petrella's approach requires adjusting the desire of the gaze through a system of circumventing and diverting, tilting and distancing. [...] The event can only be glimpsed through poetic representation, which conceals in order to reveal; it can only be tackled using strategies that manipulate the distance between absence and presence; using the necessary deviations to face that which can never be shown in full. In the appearance, in the image, the costume [and, by extension, the mask, or body paint, A.S.] has its own truth. A truth that cannot fully reveal itself, as it also has its other side; it depends in part, on its concealment.<sup>10</sup>

It is this concealment—the essence of alterity one might say—that Petrella does not violate, but makes visibly manifest, and investigates through his photos (such as the Yanomamö man, silently staring at us, with the eyes' line just above the photographer or the beholder).

Importantly, Petrella's photography is based on some ethnographic immersion with the Yanomamö, and other indigenous groups of Brazil, consisting of extended fieldtrips, often invited by indigenous communities.

*El Perspectivista* (2013) by Julia Rometti and Victor Costales, on the other hand, comes from a completely different route to ethnography or rather meta-ethnography, as I shall explain in a moment. The work is a direct reference to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's well-known contribution to the ontology debate in anthropology. In short, Viveiros de Castro turns cultural relativism on its head by suggesting that Amerindian cosmologies can be understood to be based on multinaturalism, where different



**FIGURE 1.2** *Rodrigo Petrella, Yanomami man, Catrimani community, Roraima State, Brazil, October 2009. B&W print with mineral pigment on cotton paper. Courtesy of the artist.*

beings, that is human, animal, or spirit, appear to each other in different disguises (or “natures”) but share one human culture. This implies, Viveiros de Castro argues further, that animals are people who see themselves as persons; the particular form in which they appear to humans or others, depending on the perspective, is but a mere envelope or clothing, which hides an internal human form. This means, to give an example, that jaguars, parrots, or whatever other animal or plant species, also have kinship forms, are organized in moieties, go on war expeditions, and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Rometti and Costales have lived and traveled in Latin America for six years. Yet their work cannot be called ethnographic in any conventional sense, rather it amounts to a kind of meta-ethnography. There are almost no references to specific places, peoples,



**FIGURE 1.3** *Rometti Costales, Roca | Azul | Jacinto | Marino | Errante, 2013. Concrete tiles, two volcanic stones (300x200cm). Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Jousse Entreprise, Paris. Photo © Aurélien Mole.*

or individuals, and when there are, they remain at an extremely generic level. Instead Rometti and Costales carry out an exercise in perspectivist constructivism, or conceptualism for that matter.<sup>12</sup> For instance, “Roca | Azul | Jacinto | Marino | Errante” (2013) is based on the fictional narrative of an exchange between an expatriated anarchist in the Bolivian lowlands and an Amerindian community. Art historian and critic Katya García-Antón writes:

the artists create a portrait of Azul Jacinto Marino, an imagined shaman, poet and anarchist. This comprises two volcanic rocks placed on concrete tiles, composing a Necker Cube pattern—a 3D optical illusion of a shape permanently oscillating between perspectives—traced in a deep blue. The rocks, therefore, exist within a framework of simultaneously oscillating perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

As Rometti and Costales explain further, it is precisely this multi-perspectival portrait which is at the heart of the optical illusion:

The color, the rocks and the optical illusion draw a portrait which functions as an introduction to Azul Jacinto Marino. Azul Jacinto Marino can refer, in Spanish, to different shades of blue (azul—blue, jacinto—hyacinth blue—marino—navy blue) as

well as first names (Azul is used in Mexico as feminine or masculine first name). It/ she/he plays on this ambiguity, and acts as a catalyst of ideas which constitute the notion of Anarquismo Mágico.<sup>14</sup>

The theme, or rather speculative narrative of an anarchist exile transplanted within an Amerindian community is then replayed also in “The Flag of Magical Anarchism” (2013) and “The Curtain of Magical Anarchism” (2013). Again Katya García-Antón writes:

Both flag and curtain were handmade by the artists from black and red Amazonian huayruro seeds, whose psychotropic qualities conferred the works with a magical-political status. Nailed to the wall, the flag was made from seeds beaded into a triangle echoing the anarchist emblem. The full-length curtain, meanwhile, was threaded on rope so that its front was carmine red, leaving the back black.<sup>15</sup>

In the following statement the artists outline how they have been inspired by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro:

We use Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s writings (and specifically, his book *Cannibal Metaphysics* [see note 6, A.S.]) and concepts as guidelines to think and work on forms that take objects, natural phenomena, chance, as possible agents of



**FIGURE 1.4** Rometti Costales, *The Curtain of Magical Anarchism*, 2013. Huayruro seeds, linen rope (285x245cm). Courtesy CNAP Collection, France. Photo © Aurélien Mole.