

Nicola Bozzi

Relational Computing

Özgün Eylül İşcen: How would you describe or define relational computing? How do you engage with relational computing in your work tackling the geopolitical aesthetic (to use Fredric Jameson's terms) of neoliberalism with a focus on the performance of collective identities and, more specifically, what you call "tagging aesthetics"? Where do you situate "countering" within it?

Nicola Bozzi: I am not in the least a computer science guy or much of a technically attuned person. As a premise, then, I will admit I am fascinated by tagging because it is a very intuitive, seemingly banal affordance that nonetheless enables social media users to establish relations that can be very powerful. For the same reason, my approach to "tagging" is very broad: not just hashtagging but also @-ing, geotagging, and more. Also importantly, I think about tagging not only as a form of social labeling, but as a *performative gesture of connection*, which can be aimed at assembling wider subject configurations. These configurations can represent the type of social imagination that Franco "Bifo" Berardi has written and talked about, for example the cognitariat as a wider class category.¹ It can also refer to something a bit more anchored to representation and aesthetics in a more literal sense, like race and gender stereotypes.

For example, I have recently written a paper about a series of new media artworks that deal with machine vision systems and use different forms of tagging to stitch those systems together with social media and embodied social spaces. One is *A Hipster Bar* by Max Dovey, who years ago trained a machine vision algorithm to recognize a fuzzy cultural category like the "hipster" based mostly on imagery tagged #hipster on Instagram, thus demonstrating how contradictory and fallible cultural labels are.² Then, I discuss *The Flemish Scrollers* by Dries Depoorter, who combines machine vision systems and social media in provocative ways.³ In one piece he uses AI and machine vision algorithms to @ politicians caught spending too much time on their phone in a live YouTube feed of the Belgian parliament. In another piece, *The Follower*, the artist uses geotagged content to isolate selfies taken by influencers in particular public spaces and cross-references them with public camera feeds, demonstrating how tagging stitches together the worlds of social media and urban surveillance.

Every project is different, but I like to see those banal social media gestures embedded in more complex concatenations and shown for the

significance they can have in the everyday management of our public digital selves, not only in terms of surveillance. In very different ways, both artists comment on digital infrastructures for classification while anchoring their perspectives on cultural and social figures (the hipster, the influencer, the politician), enacting and challenging the algorithmic gaze at the same time.⁴ In this sense, the “relational” aspect is reminiscent of Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” with its focus on the production of subjectivity. Bourriaud addresses the production of subjects through art by drawing upon Pierre-Félix Guattari, for whom art can help reinvent subjectivity, de-naturalizing and deterritorializing it by “unsticking it” from the individual and re-mapping it onto new arrangements. These heterogeneous pairings include the non-human, for example socio-economic and informational machines.⁵

I am not massively interested in computation as a secluded technical process, but only from a socially and culturally-situated perspective. In terms of technology being situated, a theory that comes to mind if I read the word “computation” is Fox Harrell’s take on “critical computing” from his book *Phantasmal Media*.⁶ Harrell’s book mixes computer science, cognitive science, and media arts to propose forms of computation that directly address the “phantasms” of social and cultural imagination, revealing socially-damaging cognitive automatisms and stereotypes, but also trying to create new empowering “phantasms.” Most recently, he has founded the MIT Center for Advanced Virtuality and collaborated on projects with the Universal Hip-Hop Museum and Microsoft. I have also recently read *The Black Technical Object* by Ramon Amaro, which seems more abstract and perhaps less optimistic than Harrell’s book in terms of the emancipatory potential of computation, but it also combines an attention to the formation of individual and collective consciousness through technology (in his case in a dialogue with Fanon’s exploration of the Black psyche). Going back to the “relational” in “relational computing,” there is also a big emphasis on Black existence and relationality.⁷

Even though my own research is not closely focusing on race, I am inspired by these scholars and others because they share an interest in the issue of representation. Here I mean representation as both the mediated depiction of particular groups and a matter of psychological identification, as in one’s self-image. I think European media theorists tackling digital media cultures and social media infrastructures often end up overlooking the realm of representation, which scholars from North America (usually POC) seem better equipped to discuss.

The challenge of discussing collective identities and their political character/potential in the context of digital media is their double-edged nature, which is also where “countering” becomes interesting. If

you focus on circulation too much, you dismiss their representational quality (e.g., critiquing the business model without recognizing its different impacts). However, if you zoom in too close to what is represented you risk losing the “big picture” of systemic infrastructures (e.g., leaning into the trap of visibility as a substitute for power).

I think social media and the large hashtag-driven movements of the last ten years – like Black Lives Matter, which is both a label and a constellation of networks – have led to theoretical inquiries that factor in both elements, and the more recent emergence of machine learning as an everyday thing has accelerated this process. There are a lot more theoretical works that address race and gender and do not see digital identity as this sort of disembodied, in many ways universalized thing that is often anchored mainly to personal liberties like privacy and free speech. Before I started doing my PhD, these types of theories were a lot less common (or perhaps not on my radar!).

To wrap it up, I could summarize by saying I am interested in computation that facilitates both the representation and circulation of identities, by establishing relations with others that can forge new alliances or juxtapositions. The fact that tagging is usually a public phenomenon/practice definitely adds to its aesthetic potential. From a theoretical perspective, I also care about cultivating an aesthetic angle on social media while building upon the works of scholars like Olga Goriunova or Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (especially her take on habitual new media).⁸ For me, relationality is about expanding subjectivity beyond the individual in both transformative and challenging ways.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I find it fascinating how you negotiate those binary models underlying either more systemic or more representational frameworks for understanding digital media. I share your urge to unsettle these binaries and turn to the aesthetic realm to do so – where this mediation takes place. Would you like to elaborate on the affordances of engaging with the aesthetic realm (maybe even how you understand it)? I am curious to hear about “tagging aesthetics” – would you like to share any concrete examples?

Nicola Bozzi: I adopt an aesthetic angle to emphasize the ambiguity inherent to the formation of collective subjects on social media. I am interested in recognizing networked and platformed environments as spaces for misunderstanding and serendipity, as much as communication, sociality, and protest. By this, I do not mean that platformed cultural production is inconsequential. Indeed, I see its aesthetic potential lying not strictly in the realm of representation but also in the enactment and assemblage of social and imaginary relations. In this respect, I like relational aesthetics because it is a notoriously fuzzy term that benefits from linguistic ambiguity. To make a textbook

example from the art world: Rirkrit Tiravanija feeding people in a gallery was both producing an embodied situation, which brought together art folks for a short time, and also photogenic imagery for historical documentation. The possibility for politically, socially, or culturally productive encounters is both created and signaled as such, albeit in an environment that remains undeniably “embedded” within a limited milieu.

Relationality is more scalable and traceable on social media, without losing its embeddedness, leakiness, and ambiguity. If we think about images on social media, from memes to people’s photos, there are always different types of connections. Some are cultural (e.g., a Chad, waifu, or NPC character, which resonate with globalized meme imagery). Others are material and technical links (e.g., a roll-overable link embedding a tagged picture or tweet into a relational network of familiarity with that piece of content). So, if we look at social media production through the lens of relational aesthetics, the tags that spill over from social media posts to protest banners and embodied space also stitch together materially incommensurable assemblages that encompass contradicting interpretations and narratives around the same foci – a label, an image, etc. I do not only mean political protest movements, but the everyday production of digital selves that is necessarily creative.

In this, I follow Olga Goriunova’s take on digital communities as “art platforms,” where users’ “autocreativity” participates in artistic activity even when not conceptualized as art.⁹ Other media theorists have also touched on similar topics: writing about a multitude of YOUTs converging to form a temporary “we” Wendy Chun refers to Natalie Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* video, where the gestures of many people in YouTube videos initially appear disjointed on the same screen and then are suddenly synchronized together for a moment; Jodi Dean instead writes about the selfie as a communist format, talking about reaction GIFs as well.^{10, 11}

The role of artists or critics, in this case, is to notice those dynamics and outline those configurations to suggest what they might mean politically, socially, and culturally. Even when you are addressing a multifaceted technology, sometimes it is necessary to identify a “figure” of reference, a field of conflict where the stakes of collective subjectivation and representation become tangible – even at the risk of naming something that is not quite existent or defined, like I do when I write about the “digital nomad” as a figure from critical theory.

Özgün Eylül İçsen: I am fascinated by how you expand the scope of the aesthetic realm to overcome the binary models we often impose on these relationalities you talk about. In resonance with some of the points

you are making, I could add that, with Counter-N, we are interested in complicating the monolithic view of computation, often animated by terms like platform capitalism,¹² which offers a necessary critique; however, whose overamplified importance ends up foreclosing some other paths of interpretation that focus on contradictions, frictions, etc. I would like to hear your thoughts on these different narratives that attend to the totalizing forces of computation and capital while recasting the entry points for resistance and change. Your recent work on digital nomadism as cultural production in relation to post-work theories seems relevant to these questions. Would you like to elaborate more on that?

Nicola Bozzi: I find it crucial to focus on platforms as sites of power accumulation; however, I am personally more drawn towards difference and discourse. I like your emphasis on contradictions because for me the collective identities I am interested in are reductive like stereotypes, but at the same time they are expansive because they depend on people contributing to them, twisting them, and reappropriating them.

Following up on the previous answer: what kind of figures emerge from platform cultures? By figures, I mean both sociological figures like “the tourist” and philosophical figurations like Braidotti’s “nomadic subject.” I think the aesthetic potential of digital media lies in the blending of material social relations and the critical projection of the fictional. As we have all learned through the spectacle of social media, these are the most efficiently standardized practices of self-branding predicated on the laws of visibility and engagement. Yet, they could also have slightly different resonance depending on social and cultural context. For example, the figure of the digital nomad is attractive to me because it combines a pivotal figuration within critical theory – the nomad, which is very important to Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Rosi Braidotti – with a type of social imagination that is very commodified and platform-dependent.¹³ On the one hand, we have these philosophical theories with highly political implications; on the other hand, the dream of liberation from work enacted through de-politicized, hyper-capitalist means.

Regarding depoliticization, I emphasize how tagging is presented as a one-size-fits-all affordance that encourages participation in the name of convenience. For example, let’s look at the practice of geotagging in the case of digital nomads: as users geotag photos as a way to check in at popular or photogenic locations, the geotag label links those locations, which are physically most conducive to the digital nomad imaginary, with the online publics that might aspire to go there. In this way, it participates in globalized forms of gentrification and landscape transformation in a different way than someone would by going to a random concert in London and tagging the venue. It is a small

gesture, but its effects are not equally distributed: you are sharing knowledge with other prospective nomads, but at the same time you are feeding another data point into an algorithm. Overall, you are helping to stitch together this collective dream of distributed access to panoramic offices on the beach. This gesture is not neutral since the stakes in this particular case involve the status of public space in (what usually is) a less affluent country.

In other words, the reason I choose figures like the digital nomad is they also speak to particular models of Western privilege, internet epistemologies, and hierarchies rooted in Americanized pop culture. I like to observe how those figures refract into a multitude of local declinations and then coalesce back into those macro avatars that, while they are out there as objects of debate, ultimately do not really exist. To give an example, I can refer to a work by Liz Magic Laser titled *In Real Life* (2019) that I saw at FACT Liverpool. It was a 5-channel video installation showing interviews the artist did with different remote freelancers across the world, encompassing different classes and statuses within the digital nomad ecosystem: the Western marketer, the Fiverr designer in India, the virtual assistant in Africa, etc. I do not think it was named explicitly in the project, but arguably all those people are invested in this collective dream of digital nomadism that takes very different shapes for each of them, and somehow represents a tangible model for relative economic and geographic emancipation.

The label “digital nomad” might describe some or all of them, but their experiences are incommensurable to a large extent. What fascinates me is they all enact different parts of this lifestyle to make it possible, so while not everyone might be a “nomad” in the sense that they get to travel, they all contribute to the personification, or figuration, of a particular model of globalized, individualized entrepreneurship. I think zooming in on these “cultural avatars” – figures that are not quite representable, but encompass publics, places, values, brands, and imaginaries that are somehow situated – enables a cultural critique of platforms that goes beyond the disembodied “user” and the universalized liberties mentioned before.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: What you are saying reminds me of Tarek El-Ariss’ work on the emergent counter-publics via digitality in the Arab world. El-Ariss examines new modes of contestatory politics and affective writing tied to leaking, hacking, and exposure, ranging from leaking videos and untraceable tweets to online fights and trolling campaigns.¹⁴ He even proposes the figure of the leaking subject that breaks away from the self-contained subject of Western modernity, whose consciousness is distributed via and whose agency is subdued now by the coded, fragmented, and viral nature of contemporary mediascapes. They

intervene in the codes of culture and politics while being shaped by their own interventions.

As you said, these are contextually and temporally situated interventions, and yet they eventually reconfigure how we conceive of digital aesthetics at large (which is to say, digitality as mediation) that is always already and very deeply entangled with what lies beyond or surrounds it. Would you like to expand upon any spatial or temporal sense of digital aesthetics you put forth?

Nicola Bozzi: This is a good question because the figures I center my research around emerge from a pretty Euro- and US-centric imaginary, and the temporal dimension is not something I have explored thoroughly. I am very fascinated with the globalization of American pop culture and how that often constitutes the middle ground where disparate cultures converge. Some of those codes are substantiated by the physical globalization of the art world. Some others come from African-American culture or emerge from meme cultures in a more immaterial sense. For obvious reasons, I observe this most closely in Italian visual cultures, and my work on the figure of the “gangsta” has taken a more local dimension.

Spatially, tagging practices provide that type of one-size-fits-all approach to connection that facilitates this globalizing process. Temporally, tagging is both an archival tool, preserving the “lore” behind certain configurations, but it can also drive real-time connection. My focus on “aesthetic” approaches to tagging is also a way to look at tagging not as something to be measured, as it happens in discourse around data, but witnessed or enacted in the moment. I recognize my approach as potentially problematic and limited as well, as not everything lends itself to the distance of “criticism”; for this reason, I like to discuss with people who critically incorporate tagging in their practices even when the context can be fraught. In one of the interviews I did for my PhD and published on *Digicult*, I spoke to Helena Suárez Val, an activist who curates a map of femicides in Uruguay as a form of feminist data practice based on geotagging the locations where women were murdered.¹⁵ We discussed the implication of memorializing through data and we also touched upon the role of aesthetics in her practice. It was a super interesting interview and I definitely recommend looking into her work beyond the limited perspective offered by my conversation with her.

Özgün Eylül İçsen: You have already generously shared numerous resources to look into in more depth. Aligning with that gesture, we are also curious about your historical, artistic, or theoretical references while navigating multiple disciplines ranging from sociology to arts, mediascapes from local to global, and educational settings from Italy to the United Kingdom. What are the events, works, or

figures that motivated you to work on the so-called crisis of representation in the digital age? Yet, we know very well that this “age” is historically aligned with the neoliberal turn since the 1970s. Your take on the larger realm of aesthetics and politics while addressing novel forms of cultural expression and identity/collectivity formation offer a more situated analysis of the current moment, and we would like to find out more about who your thinking allies are, or what concepts have been productive for you (or not).

Nicola Bozzi: The concept for my PhD proposal emerged from a MA thesis that I wrote while studying in Amsterdam, after which I received encouragement from my professors, especially Edward Shanken. The topic was very abstract and theoretical (as well as too ambitious): I was interested in identity in the age of globalization and social media, and the focus on tagging (at the time, “metadata”) was meant to capture the modularity of different identity models that became global because of how stereotypical they were and how easily they circulated. Back then, three books that really influenced my theoretical framework were Alexander Galloway’s *Protocol*, Matteo Pasquinelli’s *Animal Spirits*, and Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large*.¹⁶ I knew I was interested in how mediation and globalization distorted and formatted identity into stereotypical “templates” like the hipster, the nerd, or the gangsta, but I lacked the type of media studies education that would equip me to discuss things like race, gender, postcoloniality, and so on. The concept of tagging as a labeling gesture emerged more clearly when I decided I wanted to do my PhD on social media, but the focus on those different “figures” was always at the core. It was also the reason I kept moving between media studies and sociology, as well as between representations and their relational embeddings. I have always enjoyed going to conferences of different kinds and noticing how different disciplines attract different people, but since starting my PhD, I have become a lot more aware of the many disciplinary niches and invisible walls between them. In other words, the idea that I might never fully reach “my people” sometimes keeps me awake at night.

If I have to outline the geography of my theoretical influences, I would say I am fascinated both by the European school of media theory, like Bifo, Geert Lovink, or Goriunova, as well as more identity-focused scholars like Chun, Harrell, or Amaro. In terms of linking identity and infrastructures, a big inspiration was Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s *Sorting Things Out*.¹⁷ Apart from books, I get as much if not even more inspiration by going to art galleries. I have been inspired by media arts centers in the UK like FACT in Liverpool and arebyte Gallery in London, although so-called “media art” is now really ubiquitous in all sorts of gallery spaces, as well as online. In this respect, I follow the work of Italian curators and critics like Domenico Quaranta and Valentina Tanni, which is always really good and forward-thinking, as well as the Berkeley Center for New Media, or

Aksioma in Ljubljana. Thanks to Søren Pold and Christian Ulrik Andersen at Aarhus University, I have also had the chance to present at a workshop at Transmediale as a PhD student and more recently at ISEA in Paris, where I talked about my work on AR face filters as a form of platform art. I think meeting supportive people you can have conversations with is one of the most important things when you are dealing with something as solitary and even soul-crushing as academic writing can be.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Could you please suggest further Counter-Ns (e.g., N-computing[s], N-futuring[s]) and share your thoughts on them?

Nicola Bozzi: I am always wondering whether it is media I am interested in, or something else. For this reason, I would perhaps suggest mediated futuring, or communicative futuring. Are mediation and communication what media are all about these days? Deleuze and Guattari wrote “we do not lack communication ... we lack creation” (it was quoted in the header of the defunct *Rekombinant* newsletter), while at the moment I am reading a book about anime cultures and the concept of animation, animacy, etc. I think in the age of avatars and the blending of embodied, digital, and visual culture (all of which are commodified more than ever) those concepts might need some counter-perspective.

There are also other keywords emerging: On the one hand, there is a growing emphasis on worlding, leveraging technical power to experience immaterial environments and delve deeper into the digital; on the other hand, creating autonomous infrastructures among artists today (think DAOs, tokenization, etc.) is also increasingly popular. I think all of that is great, however – going back to relationality – being immersed and being situated are not necessarily the same. I mean it in both a cultural and technical sense: being familiar with certain memes does not automatically guarantee access to the same experience as those who started circulating them, and being “immersed” within the right digital environment or equipped with the right tools does not necessarily mean you will use them. I am fascinated by media we use despite ourselves – for example: why are we still hooked on Twitter (I refuse to call it X!) if it’s become so toxic and Mastodon is a more ethical solution? The ways our media make us beyond the functional hooks of communication or participation is what I am really interested in.

1 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Cognitarian Subjectivation,” *e-flux*, November 2010, available at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/20/67633/cognitarian-subjectivation/>.

2 Please see the artist’s website for further information: <https://maxdovey.com/hipsterbar/>.

3 Please see the artist’s online portfolio: <https://driesdepoorter.be>.

4 Nicola Bozzi, “Machine Vision and Tagging Aesthetics: Assembling Socio-Technical Subjects through New Media Art.” *Open Humanities Library – Cultural Representations*

of *Machine Vision*, 2023.

5 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 88–91.

6 D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

7 Ramon Amaro, *The Black Technical Object: On Machine Learning and the Aspiration of Black Being* (London: Sternberg Press, 2023).

8 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

9 Olga Goriunova, *Art Platforms and Cultural Production on the Internet* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

10 Please see the artist's website for further information: <https://bookchin.net/projects/mass-ornament/>.

11 Jodi Dean, "Faces as Commons: The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism," *Open!*, 31 December 2016.

12 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2016).

13 Nicola Bozzi, "#digitalnomads, #solotravellers, #remoteworkers: A Cultural Critique of the Traveling Entrepreneur on Instagram," *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 2020.

14 Tarek El-Ariss, *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

15 Nicola Bozzi, "Tagging Aesthetics #5: Feminist Politics of (Geo)location. Interview with Helena Suárez Val," *Digicult*, 30 September 2019, available at <https://digicult.it/internet/tagging-aesthetics-5-feminist-politics-of-geolocation-interview-with-helena-suarez-val/>.

16 See: Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers/Institute of Network Cultures, 2008); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996).

17 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

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