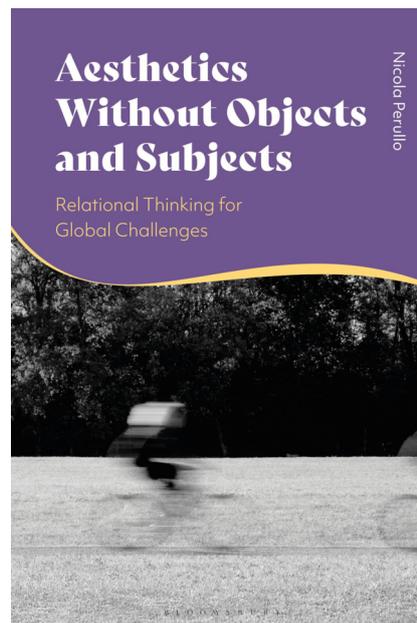


# *Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges – A Book Review*

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Nicola Perullo's latest book, *Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects – Relational Thinking for Global Challenges* (henceforth AWOS), is a work of which it is difficult to provide a brief portrait that remains faithful to it and maintains its internal complexities and tensions. Indeed, the structure and style of the work reflect the aesthetic project the author takes on: a new approach to perception capable of bringing out the radically processual and constantly

becoming nature of reality. The goal Perullo sets himself with his aesthetic proposal is rather ambitious, but it could not be otherwise, given the breadth and depth of the crisis he intends to respond to. In the first chapter, *Perceptual Crisis and the Challenges for Aesthetics*, Perullo frames the problem he intends to address: “My main thesis is: the global crisis we *participate in* (not: ‘we witness’) – environmental crisis, climate crisis, political crisis – is itself a crisis in perception. Specifically, it presents itself as an anxiety crisis due to loss of control—namely, perceptual control” (Perullo, 2025, p. 5). Already from the way Perullo describes our relation to the problem (we participate in) we can begin to sense the direction in which he intends his project to move. We are not faced with a clear separation between subject and object (not least because, as we shall see, it is the categories of subject and object themselves that are called into question), between us and “the crisis”; but, rather, a “coexistence” within the same “fabric of the real” (Perullo, 2025, p. 40).

To emerge from this crisis, Perullo argues, there must be an “evolution of humanity itself” (Perullo, 2025, p. 5): an evolution that leads humanity to become “*more than human*” (Perullo, 2025, p. 6). This ‘more-than’ is not understood by Perullo as a mere additional surplus; but, rather as an opening to everything else: “[...] more-than-human means cooperative, collusive, and exposed” (Perullo, 2025, p. 7). An important step in this direction can be taken by overcoming the “duality between mind and world, subject and object” (Perullo, 2025, p. 7). The crystallisation of this separation in these dualisms generates, according to Perullo, an approach to the world characterised by control and domination, and it is from this observation that Perullo moves his critique against what he frames as a kind of modern religious precept: ‘activism’. Activism for Perullo is unable to address the problems of our times (the various crises mentioned in the opening of the book) because it remains anchored in that epistemological-cognitive fence according to which perception is nothing more than the first step to ‘domination and control’. The alternative proposed by Perullo is to practise a kind of conscious and attentive ‘passivism’: a passivism, therefore, that does not lead to an arid indifference but, rather, to co-participation in the “flow of consciousness as experience” (Perullo, 2025, p. 7). Becoming aware of this co-participation, this co-habitation, is, according to Perullo, of fundamental importance in facing any kind of crisis that affects us because this awareness means realising that we are part of a ‘condominium’: a condominium of which we are neither the only tenants nor, much less, the most numerous.

The idea of cohabitation in the condominium is probably one of the most interesting and representative of the AWOS project. With it, Perullo intends to question the hierarchization of reality to which we have become accustomed: a hierarchization that has placed us, humans, at the centre of the world ecosystem of which, as we have already mentioned, we are but one of the different life forms that co-inhabit it. In the AWOS perspective, this ‘rebalancing’ of our ecosystem serves to emphasise, once again, the radically collaborative and relational nature of our living. “*Homo*, then, instead of *comprehending* the nonhuman and *arguing* on its behalf – two sides of the

same coin – must strive to *correspond* with it, thus more-than-human becoming” (Perullo, 2025, p. 8). The concept of correspondence plays a fundamental role in Perullo’s aesthetic proposal. Borrowed from Tim Ingold’s studies, correspondence here stands for that series of multiple possibilities of interaction included in that ‘active passivism’, perceptive and attentive, which Perullo hopes for as a paradigm shift from the concept of activism understood as a compulsion to act: and it is precisely this process of continuous correspondence that should guide our cohabitation within the condominium.

The aesthetic-philosophical paradigm shift hoped for by Perullo becomes clearer if we keep in mind the notions of ‘doing’ and ‘undergoing’ developed by John Dewey: one of the fundamental theoretical references of AWOS (along with Deleuze, Derrida, Morton, Ingold, Rovelli, Wittgenstein and Whitehead). The aesthetics Perullo looks at in fact shifts the focus from the doing to the undergoing and, in the author’s words, we move from a “project/product oriented intentional *agency* (doing)” to a “process-oriented, aimless, attentional perceiving that takes care, first and foremost, of the undergoing” (Perullo, 2025, p. 9). It is precisely this ‘care for the undergoing’ that we must focus on if we are to better understand the direction in which the AWOS project intends to move. The specific attention given to the undergoing allows us to better focus on reality in its radically processual and relational nature: the reality that has emerged from the discoveries of quantum physics, a reality that is also very close to that described by Buddhist thought.

Already from these brief references, one realises that the sources from which Perullo draws are multiple and heterogeneous, and some readers accustomed to the compartmentalization of knowledge might be baffled by this heterogeneity: in the humble opinion of the writer, it is precisely this constant challenge to the reader (and to the sedimented and now naturalized habits of academia) that makes reading AWOS important and necessary in the contemporary philosophical landscape. Perullo does not hide the tensions and problems that might arise from such an approach and indeed openly acknowledges them, making them almost ‘the punctum’ of his work. At the end of the first chapter, describing his own approach to the various theoretical references in the work, Perullo speaks of a ‘Syncretism without method’: “This work is an eclectic essay that, with its limited means, strives for syncretism as the effect of the lack of and dissatisfaction with a single direction” (Perullo, 2025, pp. 25–26).

This ‘eclectic syncretism’ becomes, in the course of the work, a method for exercising the new approach to perception that AWOS hopes for from the very first pages. Reading AWOS is in fact a constant exercise in correspondence and attunement: the style and structure used by Perullo invite the reader to constantly practise attention and focus in the undergoing of reading. Perullo returns several times throughout his work to the same themes, sometimes to better clarify what he had at first only hinted at, and others to enrich the description of a concept. This recursive, nonlinear writing prevents one from following the development of a concept in the manner

to which we are usually accustomed and forces the reader to follow the structure of the book in its 'leaps' and to return to the passages already read. This 'stretch' turns out to be one of the greatest strengths of the work, which, to quote Hanna Arendt, commits the reader to 'thinking without a bannister'. Perullo offers few footholds for the reader, does not want to offer a theory and does not promise systematicity, but it is precisely because of these inconveniences that the structure of the work manages to faithfully describe this constantly changing landscape: the radical processuality of the reality to which it refers.

Perullo's aesthetics aims to correspond with the reality described by Buddhism and quantum physics, and to do so, it must attempt to 'correspond' with the new scientific paradigm we have entered: for this reason, in this 'new' aesthetic horizon that Perullo wants to inaugurate, subject and object "fall together" (Perullo, 2025, p. 11). Their fall is the natural consequence of an approach that favours process over product, the coexistence of condominium over anthropological hierarchy, attentive and perceptive passivism over activism aimed at control and domination, and undergoing over doing.

If the real 'is' not but happens, as even quantum physics tells us today, a coherent aesthetic theory will have to draw certain consequences from this [...] AWOS takes into account the relational nature through which the aesthetic as immanent event presents itself. Reality happens as a continuous unfolding of relations; but "relation" here, has not to be understood as connection between subjects and objects. Rather, it is the con-, the entangled field from which subjects and objects develop. (Perullo, 2025, p. 12)

It is precisely on this plane of the 'con-' that much of Perullo's theoretical efforts will focus: trying to give a more precise description of this co-constitutive, relational and processual entanglement is in fact one of the primary goals of AWOS.

Already these assumptions give us a sense that AWOS presents itself as a theoretical project that is difficult to grasp: being a "narrative that does not aspire to any exhaustiveness" (Perullo, 2025, p. 21), it does not offer the reader any firm points with which to orient himself or herself and to hold on to. That said, it should also be noted that it is precisely this anti-systematicity of Perullo's project that ensures its greater 'coherence' with the framework with which it intends to confront: the reality as a flux and 'continuous unfolding of relations' that we mentioned earlier. By 'coherence' here we want to highlight Perullo's 'mimetic' approach to the phenomenon he intends to provide a description of: from this perspective, the correspondence he refers to several times in the text can also be seen as a process of 'attunement' to the fabric of reality and its processes. Reading the concept of correspondence in this way allows us to see it as a reworking, in an ecological and phenomenological key, of the Adornian concept of mimesis: both concepts in fact seek to move beyond that sharp separation between subject and object from which Perullo's work examined here takes its first steps, and both move away from that compulsion to act that remains, for both authors, chained to ends of domination and control.

The aesthetics presented to us by Perullo is anchored in its etymological root (*aisthesis*-sensation), and for this reason, the response to the crisis of perception mentioned in the opening of the work is characterised as a proposal for a different approach to perception itself. This kind of aesthetics is not a discipline confined to the “philosophy of art” (as is often, unfortunately, still understood in some academic circles) but, rather, a “liminal mode of operating and knowing” (Perullo, 2025, p. 15). A feeling that is therefore also always a thinking (and vice versa) we might say reformulating according to a lexicon closer to Dewey: here, this communion of feeling and thinking seems to be one of the characteristic features of the aesthetics Perullo works on and is probably the best way to approach the profound relationality of the real that is thematized in the second chapter.

This chapter is probably the most deeply theoretical in Perullo’s work and in it we find the most extensive and in-depth exposition of the various contents anticipated in the first one: here Perullo argues more extensively for his central thesis, ‘the real is relational’. In order to move in this direction, Perullo’s project shares with various scientific and cultural models their “non-foundational frameworks” (Perullo, 2025, p. 33); but, nevertheless, Perullo emphasises that the relationship between science and philosophy in AWOS is not declined as the subjugation of one over the other but rather as a collaboration: both describe the same reality from two different planes. In these pages Perullo grapples with several major problems, but we can try to summarise his efforts in the following question: how to offer a description of reality that does justice to the radical processuality that constitutes it? It is Perullo himself who frames his project more as a narrative and a corresponding description than as a closed and complete theoretical system: “As a philosophy, aesthetics without objects and subjects is therefore not an explanatory system but a descriptive, artisanal narrative” (Perullo, 2025, p. 157). But how does one decline a processual aesthetics? Already in the first pages, Perullo offers clues and anticipations: “Relational aesthetics is about how to perceive aesthetically in a haptic and processual key” (Perullo, 2025, p. 21), but these ‘clues’ are not enough and these taken paths are constantly interrupted to be taken up again later. Perullo’s writing from this point of view seems to resemble the oblique and uneconomical proceeding of the ‘pack donkey’ described by Tim Ingold (2013, pp. 137–141) at the end of one of his books. In AWOS we never get the final and conclusive definition of a concept presented to us, but only a ‘snapshot’ of it that captures it in the flux of its becoming; to it, we will have to add the others that will follow and compose them together in a kind of philosophical montage that is never concluded, never final.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the main references in this second chapter are Bergson, James and Whitehead, and it is with them that Perullo wants to go beyond “[...] the comfort zone of unilinear and standardized perception” (Perullo, 2025, p. 33). But how does AWOS intend to overcome that kind of perception? Perullo starts

<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Perullo’s multiple descriptions of the same concept reminded me of the way Sergei Eisenstein (1985, pp. 210-226), through his re-reading of Lessing, comments on Homer’s literary montage process.

from the rich description of a stone offered by physicist Carlo Rovelli. The stone that emerges from his description in no way resembles an entity that is fixed and stable in its singularity; rather, its instability, its contingent and ephemeral nature in the passage of time, its diverse and possible uses and thus also its multiple affordances are highlighted. Perullo links Rovelli's stone to another rich description, that offered by Ingold for the 'stone of Selinunte' and from Ingold he then moves on to the description of another stone, that offered by Martin Heidegger. This inaugural reflection on the processuality of the stone allows Perullo to describe the real as "[...] made of different orders of experience, various planes of different perceptual densities" (Perullo, 2025, p. 31), and in capturing the diversity and multiplicity of these 'different orders of experience', the inevitability of human perspective is not ignored. "[...] a stone can only speak through 'us', through relations that develop from our encounter with it and that involve a perceptual engagement from our side" (Perullo, 2025, p. 32). The proposed perspective of AWOS does not intend to conceal this inevitability, but, rather, it wants to try to place it within that 'more-than-human' nature of humanity to which we have already referred. Indeed, to admit that a stone can only tell its own story if we are the ones to make it speak is not to deny its radically processual nature, its various possible applications and implications, and the constitutive instability of the flow from which it emerges, for a moment, as an island of crystallised meaning.

To go beyond the fetishized dualism of objects and subjects is not to find oneself in an abstract void where there is nothing left with which to orient oneself but rather to realise that those entities that Perullo 'targets' already in the title of the book are nothing but singular and contingent manifestations of relations and processes, flows and transformations: for this reason, beyond the practical-theoretical necessities of subdivision and stabilization that we encounter daily in everyday life and thought processes, they have no reason to exist in absolute isolation. "[...] it does not mean to surpass duality, which is the inescapable tool for agency and identity, but to avoid dualism" (Perullo, 2025, p. 43). Maintaining this tension without resolving into either extreme is by no means an easy task and inevitably requires a great deal of effort, starting with the vocabulary we are accustomed to. "I propose an approach that involves suspending or diverging from the conventional conceptual vocabulary that relies on dualism" (Perullo, 2025, p. 36).

Perullo's goal remains to achieve a different way of perceiving, a way that is more adequate to grasp the richness of this ever-changing flux that we call 'reality': in doing so, he chooses the contemporary current of thought Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO) as main theoretical interlocutor. AWOS and OOO start from a common problem, the need to overcome the centrality of the subject, but from it, they draw diametrically opposed conclusions. OOO is object-centred while AWOS, on the other hand, is relation-centred: according to Perullo, putting objects at the centre instead of subjects merely re-presents a dualistic ontology in which the focus has shifted away from human subjects. The difference between the two approaches is already in the name: Perullo

does not want to replace one ontology with another and therefore prefers the concept of 'ontogenesis'. "Instead of an Object-Oriented-Ontology, therefore, my proposal is for a Process-Oriented Ontogenesis: from OOO to PROO!. With an exclamation mark, of course, to emphasize the dynamic and processual element" (Perullo, 2025, p. 21). The ontogenesis proposed in AWOS thus seems better equipped to deal with the radical relationality of the real: as we said earlier, the centrality attributed by OOO to objects as entities in their own right does not break the dualism that Perullo would like to overcome but merely reverses it by re-presenting it under a different shape. Moreover, what distinguishes AWOS from OOO is its strong component of co-participation: for Perullo objects are not offered in their absolute independence but only in their co-participation in the fabric of the real in which we too are immersed.

At this point, it seems fair to discuss another of the key concepts introduced by Perullo in AWOS: the concept of 'agencing'. We have already highlighted the need raised by Perullo to work on language to produce a vocabulary appropriate to the aesthetic project of AWOS, and in the concept of agencing we can see this effort directly at work. The shift from the noun (agency) to the verb (agencing) denotes a shift towards the plane of becoming and impermanence: agency allows us to circumscribe a subject's (or at any rate a more or less defined entity's) capacity to act, while agencing wants to shift our attention to the process in which reality unfolds and in which we are always already involved. Perullo by agencing refers to a 'correspondence between doing and undergoing' in which the needle of balance tends more towards the latter: the relevance of a research that moves in this direction seems to me to be confirmed by the fact that other seemingly distant research also focuses on similar problems from different perspectives. Hartmut Rosa (2023), for example, through Resonance theory, seeks to explore that 'middle' space between activity and passivity that he calls 'medio-passive'. In addition to the theoretical relevance of the concept of agencing for a possible dialogue with other research (to which only minimal reference can be made here), the concept of agencing is the perfect manifestation of that movement beyond the fetishisation of dualism to which Perullo aspires from the very first pages of his work.

To conclude, I would now like to turn to another of the most interesting concepts that emerged from AWOS's theoretical effort: the 'haptic perception'. As we have already repeated several times, the AWOS project can be seen as a major effort aimed at the transformation of our approach to perception: at several points in the work, Perullo criticises the dominance of 'the visual' in our culture and the always-guaranteed presence of the 'solid world' on which we base our certainties even in the epistemological sphere. The alternative proposed by Perullo to diverge from those modes of perception chained to the solid and the visual lies precisely in haptic perception. The word 'haptic' comes from the Greek *haptikós* meaning 'able to touch', but the haptic to which Perullo refers is not reducible to tactility alone: not least because such an approach would contradict the need to move beyond

the dominance of the ‘solid world’ in our perceptual horizon. The haptic approach for Perullo first and foremost indicates a “relationship of intimacy, a feeling-with” that stands in stark contrast to the notions of “critical distance, disinterest, and objective knowledge” (Perullo, 2025, p. 101). The haptic approach, on the contrary, aims at engagement and *cum-patire*, undergoing and going-with, com-participation: “[...] I will use the term haptic in the sense of a processual, engaged perceiving: observing without objectivating, that is, by avoiding ontologizing the process of the formation of forms/objects, which thus crystallize as transient passages” (Perullo, 2025, p. 101). With haptic Perullo does not aim at a greater level of ‘immersion’: indeed, Perullo at several points in the book distances himself from certain modern tendencies founded on the promise of immersivity; but, rather, at a more attentive disposition in listening and receiving. Thus, that ‘care for the undergoing’ referred to already in the first part of AWOS returns: haptic perception seems to be the privileged tool to put into practise this ‘active passivity’ that Perullo frames as “[...] listening and submission to the current of life” (Perullo, 2025, p. 101). Haptic perception is not a matter of grasping, but of corresponding; it privileges proximity and coexistence over distance and control: it invites us to feel ‘at home’ in the undergoing instead of trying to escape it by rebalancing the relationship towards the doing. Perullo contrasts this form of perception with the current fascination for immersion in digital aesthetics, which, in his view, remains captive to the logic of control.<sup>2</sup> Immersion still presupposes a subject entering a space; haptic perception, by contrast, undoes that distinction altogether. Here, thanks to the haptic perception corresponding with the flow of the real in which we are always immersed, the ethical and ecological dimension of Perullo’s project emerges more strongly, and it is precisely on this dimension that Perullo closes his work: with a reflection that invests philosophy in general as an (in)discipline and vocation.

The theme of philosophy as a vocation emerges as early as the first page of the work: “This book supports and pursues the idea that philosophy, by its nature, is not a profession but a vocation [...]” (Perullo, 2025, p. 1), but it is in the last chapter devoted to *Artisanal Intelligence* that Perullo can return to the topic with greater argumentative force and tie it to the theoretical project of AWOS illustrated precedingly. Perullo argues for the need to think of philosophy (and aesthetics in particular) as an artisanal and amateur activity: in clear opposition to the increasing specialisation that pervades every scientific field. The amateur is not understood by Perullo as one who improvises in a given profession without any in-depth knowledge of his or her subject, but rather, as one who diverges from standardised practices and, consequently, standardised results. The amateur’s approach, in AWOS’s perspective, has an advantage over the skilled worker (in our case, the one who practises philosophy as a profession) because AWOS’s aesthetics favour sharing and

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Velotti’s (2024) most recent works also focus on similar issues. There is not enough space here to investigate possible resonances or differences in depth, but I would like to point out that the crisis identified by Perullo at the beginning of his work seems to be stimulated by a loss of control, perceptual ‘control’.

listening, undergoing and proximity: all of which are characteristics of the amateur as framed by Perullo. Therefore, AWOS argues in favor of a shift from competence to compassion, and in order to accomplish this shift, aesthetic education, which for Perullo is characterised first and foremost as an “attunement to the life processes” (Perullo, 2025, p. 159), cannot be ignored.

The project/process of AWOS, while containing within itself internal tensions and problems, remains one of the most interesting proposals within the contemporary aesthetic landscape. Rethinking our approach to perception is obviously a task that cannot be said to have been exhausted with a single work, but Perullo’s proposals seem to trace fertile paths full of possibilities for the debate to come. In a world increasingly affected by the digital revolutions of artificial intelligence and the progressive proliferation of spaces where online replaces physical presence, rethinking a perceptive approach that favours coparticipation and proximity, coexistence and engagement, becomes a concrete possibility for an ethical exercise of thought.

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