

Martin Guinard  
**Homage to  
Bruno Latour**

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Some years ago, Bruno Latour told me what one of his teachers had said to him as a young student: “Bruno, we ask you to fill one glass of water with your ideas, and you give us a flood!” It was indeed this inexhaustible flow of ideas on science, law, arts, and politics that Bruno invited us to climb aboard with – not to drown in its downpour, but to find ways of navigating an Earth that had changed by entering what he called the New Climatic Regime.

While the impulses of his thought were dazzling, the empirical philosophy he defended had to feel its way through long and often collaborative investigations. This was the case for *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, probably the most comprehensive entry into his work, and an interface between two of its major stages – the anthropology of the Moderns and the eruption of the New Climate Regime.



Sarah Sze and Bruno Latour walk-through the exhibition "Night into Day" by Sarah Sze, 2020. Photo: Edouard Caupeil

For one who defined the social in terms of “irreductions” in which “nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else,” everything had to be described and articulated.<sup>1</sup> As a theorist of networks, Bruno was also a thinker of diplomacy, investigating scientific, legal, religious, and political modes of existence by studying their specific veracity. Hence the question of what it means to speak scientifically, and how it differs from speaking politically or legally. The goal was to identify the “distinct tonality” of each of these modes of existence and the kind of truth they could convey, not as different domains, but as different networks. Although they could intersect, each would unfold with a specific “signature.”<sup>2</sup>

Diplomacy also meant creating a procedure to negotiate between incompatible ways of living

in the world (as was the case for the 2020 Taipei Biennial and a related issue of *e-flux journal*). Negotiation did not mean ignoring adversaries and allies, but clarifying positions. What was strategic in this redefinition was the integration of nonhumans. One of the last times I saw him was at the end of August 2022 during the Environmental History symposium at LUMA in Arles. The botanist Véronique Mure had presented the virtuous effects of the *Ailanthus*, a plant considered to be invasive, and Bruno asked her about the allies and enemies of this plant. When he was told that this plant had a tendency to destabilize slabs of concrete by piercing through them, he exclaimed: “Magnificent! Let’s applaud!”

It was striking to see how easily Bruno moved back and forth between theoretical propositions and ethnography. I remember when he was almost seventy years old after writing *Facing Gaia*, he said he was tired of writing about ideas and wanted to return to fieldwork. It was precisely through his field observations and the experimental workshops he organized that he intended to remain grounded. The stakes were high, as this ground was precisely what the Moderns had lost to a dissociation between the territory where they live (common living spaces) and the territories they depend upon in order to live (notably the places from which they extract resources).

Bruno’s thinking could destabilize his readers with an explosion of several categories – the end of the Great Divide between nature and culture, society and the individual, subjects and objects, facts and values – but he also wanted to transmit his theoretical displacements in an intelligible way. He therefore multiplied his ways of expressing himself, writing an abundance of texts, of course, but also repeatedly scribbling diagrams and drawing up summary tables. When thinking aloud he was guided by the gestures of his hands, which helped him to formulate his thoughts and make them understood. When his students were stuck, he sometimes advised that they “dance the movement of their arguments.”

To explore problematics, Bruno would read (at an incredible speed), but he would also follow his persistent need to write, which was a daily practice. For him, writing was not the juxtaposition of ideas, but a way of mobilizing beings, of triggering actants in hopes that they would seize their reader. As the problems he confronted were of such magnitude – from modernity to the New Climate Regime! – it was necessary to constantly multiply the ways of approaching them. This was done through all

sorts of experiments and projects – workshops, theater plays, and exhibitions – that I was lucky to work on alongside Bruno for six years.

While his projects led to many experiments beyond the academic sphere, he didn’t see himself as a master of all trades. According to him, philosophy was not a metalanguage, but one medium among others – with its own specificities and richness, but also its own limits. And it must take care not to crush other modes of expression. Bruno therefore relied on close collaborations with people whose skills he lacked, and he gave them great freedom of initiative. He did not impose a path, but invited us to explore problems with him, always remaining incredibly open to discussion. Around each project, a collective would be created, and then for each collective he would become the collector.

Working with Bruno was as addictive as it was funny and profoundly stimulating. I remember a moment that disoriented me a few months after I began. We were preparing an exhibition, and he told me serenely, without a care in the world: “Don’t hesitate to betray me.” This sentence confused me, especially after I had been so enthusiastic about working with him, spending long hours trying to establish correspondences between an exhibition and his abundant ideas. Yet there was no reproach on his part. He was simply referring to a concept in science and technology studies, namely that there is no translation without transformation, so to translate is therefore to betray. In completely accepting the transformation that must take place when ideas pass into becoming an exhibition, he showed how the freedom he gave to his collaborators, but also to the medium of an exhibition, would inevitably act on his ideas in return.

Criticisms understandably arise when philosophers curate exhibitions and use artworks merely to illustrate ideas. But in fact we took a very different approach, which was to imagine an encounter between artists’ works and his ideas, each of which followed different trajectories. This encounter had to take place without the work being hierarchically subjected to a theoretical proposal that would reduce it to a simple illustration of a subject. It was therefore necessary to try grasping what the work “did,” to not dictate what the works should say. This often implied rewriting, reformulating, or reworking the effect that the works produced, but also conscientiously considering how they were placed in space, and sometimes proposing new commissions to artists.

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Introducing artworks to Bruno was a jubilant exercise, but also a risky one. Not finding the right way to describe the artwork's sensitive displacements, the networks it unfolded, the affects it stimulated would mean immediately losing his attention, without any hope of return. On the other hand, if the work began to speak, Bruno would show visible pleasure in opening himself to a new experience, discovering previously undetectable aspects of the work, connecting it to unexpected references, and then expressing deep gratitude.<sup>3</sup>

Bruno approached the exhibition space as a laboratory for deploying thought experiments intertwined with sensory and bodily experiments. "Laboratorium" was the first time he participated in an exhibition, thanks to an invitation from Hans Ulrich Obrist, after which he worked on large-scale exhibitions for nearly twenty years, notably at ZKM with Peter Weibel and then at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum for the 2020 Taipei Biennial, upon the invitation of Ping Lin. The exhibitions we curated had to be like a "scale model" of unsolvable problems that were too important to be ignored. At the opening of the exhibition "Reset Modernity!" at ZKM in 2016, a journalist said, "I'm going to play devil's advocate: What's the point of having exhibitions about ecological issues?" Bruno replied in one breath that aesthetics affords a "becoming sensitive." And the exhibition is a place of dialogue between three different types of aesthetics: scientific, artistic, and political. Scientific aesthetics, thanks to its instruments, allows knowledge of problems such as climate change to emerge. The artistic aesthetic allows the metabolizing of affects. Finally, political aesthetics allow us to gather and mobilize various stakeholders.

But perhaps the most important aesthetic question for Bruno concerned tone. I remember an email addressed to the cocurators of "Reset Modernity!," Donato Ricci, Christophe Leclercq, and I, just a few days before we completed the exhibition booklet text. The email contained only an attachment and the subject line: "What matters is the tone." The attachment was a World Wildlife Fund poster for COP21 depicting, in a miserable photo montage, the scene from Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, but replacing the main protagonist with a panda bear climbing a barricade, while other people took selfies or rode electric scooters. Of course, this was a bit of irony on Bruno's part, but still reflected a deep preoccupation of his, both in writing and in art, which was the question of finding the right tone – one that, on its own,

could absorb shock and mobilize people. He was thus not interested in postures from what he called "critiqueland" unveiling an underlying truth rather than describing the networks deployed around a situation. He also disliked overarching visions proclaiming to be political without having been immersed in meticulous field investigations. This was why he felt closer to activists – who try to activate yet remain open to learning from situations – than to militants, who think they already know.

In 2015, the crucial question was how to become sensitive to climate change. Six years later, in preparation for the "Critical Zones" exhibition at ZKM and the 2020 Taipei Biennial, it was no longer a matter of transitioning out of denial, but of helping the growing number of people who felt lost in the immensity of the shock. As Chantal Latour said, let's not leave people at the edge of the cliff.

The work of facing the New Climate Regime is immense, and Bruno has "equipped" (as he would say) many, thanks to his observations, his methodology of mapping controversies and identifying attachments, the concepts he created, but also his profound intellectual and human generosity. For this, I can only say: Thank you, Bruno.

Like microbes entering a body, he has spread to all those who will continue to work on these issues. Although Bruno was deeply concerned with issues of survival raised by the New Climate Regime, he kept his ability to be astonished by the world until his final days, less with regard to the infinite cosmos and the stars, but instead marveling at all the interactions making life possible in the Critical Zone. Bruno has given this priceless gift to those who have known him and those who will continue to know him through his work – of having made life more interesting than life.

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1

Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Harvard University Press, 1988), 158.

2

Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 2013), 370.

3

It is also important to note that he continuously expressed his deep gratitude – to the artists, scholars, and activists with whom we worked; to the team at Sciences Po médialab, notably Donato Ricci, Christophe Leclercq, and Valérie Pihet for their editorial, design, and curatorial work; to the team at ZKM, notably its director and Bruno’s friends Peter Weibel and cocurator Bettina Korintenberg, as well as Margit Rosen, Philipp Ziegler, Daria Mille, and Barbara Kiolbassa; to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, especially its director Ping Lin, chief curator Sharleen Yu, and and Biennial cocurator Eva Lin; and to the Centre Pompidou Metz, especially its director Chiara Parisi and chief curator Jean-Marie Gallais.

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