

Affects, Aesthetics, and Activism: *An Interview* with *Dr. Christoph Brunner*

By Atal Katawazi and Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra

Preface to the Interview

by Atal Katawazi

On December 12th 2024, our Editor-in-chief Georgina and I visited Dr. Brunner. We discussed art and theory, media, decolonial studies and the disruptive potential of academia. Dr. Brunner discussed the importance of the Deleuzian ‘idiot question’, the question of ‘what else there is, after everything has been said and done’. We discussed how theory inside of academia can be very comfortable, with a serious risk that it is reduced to merely playing language games. While these academic games are fun and necessary, our global problems are too pressing to get stuck on them.

Six months after Dr. Brunner declared his wish for students to develop an activist sense, there was an encampment for the Palestinian cause on Campus Woudestein. The encampment had as its main demands that the university cut all ties with the settler-colonial state ‘Israel’ on grounds of genocide and put out a statement in solidarity with the Palestinian people. The encampment was evicted from campus by over 50 riot police officers, as the CvB wanted to make place for a ‘wellbeing festival’. None of the encampment’s demands were heard. Still, the university remains in a ‘security state’ with extra security personnel, checks and camera’s adorning our campus.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the whole ordeal, was the silence of our own faculty. We find ourselves within a faculty and whose staff teach, write, and research questions of moral, social, and political philosophy - specifically Critical Theory, decolonial theory, feminist theory. Many students, including me, find it hard to give this credibility, if they cannot even speak out against a genocidal apartheid state. Or at the very least, be in solidarity with our activist students and staff when they get violently evicted.

One thing was clear to me: our interview was not finished. On the 28th of June, a month after the eviction, I visited Dr. Brunner in his office again. In this conversation I felt stuck in a double bind, the office setting felt as if I was face to face with the Institution. Yet, in front of me I found a person that was kind and caring, and equally frustrated with institutions, while obviously being a part of it.

The conversation lasted about an hour, it was a difficult and personal dialogue, there was a sense of shared frustration. Throughout our talk I realized that our faculty staff, academic and non-academic alike, are constantly themselves stuck in double binds. On the one hand they are part of the university, a public institution, which makes their work inherently political. On the other hand, they also feel like individuals who are just doing a job, already struggling with temporary contracts, constant performance measures and plenty of workload. If you appeal to staff, as persons, they will immediately respond that they care deeply about the Palestinian plight and the ongoing genocide, but that their hands are tied by the university. If you appeal to staff, institutionally, they will immediately retort that they will not make a unified statement as faculty, because they are all individuals who do not share common values and thus could never speak out together. The personal values, then, holier than the institution.

I realized that I was too demanding of ‘our’ professors. That they, too, are being held hostage by the political and economic structures they also actively take part in - not unlike the students. The big difference between them is of course that the professors hold more power, and have a mortgage. ‘Our’ professors are nothing but minions of the university, which is one of the claws of the state. They could try to incorporate critical theory in their curriculum, use an intersectional feminist pedagogy, and invite speakers from marginalized communities and give them a podium. But despite this, I fear this would not lead to much, our system is already deeply flawed. What I was asking of ‘our’ professors, to stand up and speak out against oppression, would mean we would have to dismantle the whole of white patriarchal capitalism, to start somewhere.

At the end of the conversation, we both felt cynical. After the recording stopped, we left the office and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* came to my mind. He wrote on the ‘Jewish Question’:

“Colonial racism is no different from other racisms. Anti-Semitism cuts me to the quick; I get upset; a frightful rage makes me anemic; they are denying me the right to be a man. I cannot disassociate myself from the fate reserved for my brother. Every one of my acts commits me as a man. Every instance of my reticence, every instance of my cowardice, manifests the man.”

I finally realized that in our conversation we got stuck in a cynical academic game. Every act commits us as human beings, how can we disassociate from the fates reserved for our Palestinian siblings? How can we disassociate from the fates reserved for our, Jewish, Sudanese, Congolese, Kurdish and South-African siblings? How do we explain to our children that we lived in times of Apartheid and genocide and remained silent, how do we even explain this to ourselves?

Walking out of his office, I shared this sentiment with Christoph. He turned to me and said: “You should have added this in the interview”. We smiled. The right thing to do should not have to be easy for us to do it. If we have to dismantle white, patriarchal capitalism for justice, then let us.

Dr. Christoph Brunner was appointed assistant professor of Media and Technology at the Erasmus School of Philosophy in 2023. His research intersects media studies, aesthetics, critical theory, and cultural studies. He obtained his bachelor’s in Cultural and Religious studies from the University of Bremen. He then moved on to Goldsmiths College, at the University of London, for a master’s in Cultural and Media Studies. Afterwards he completed a PhD in humanities with a focus on continental philosophy at the Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. After his PhD completion Dr. Brunner held various research positions in Europe and America. Our Editor-in-chief Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra and interview editor Atal Katawazi visited Dr. Brunner in his office and conducted an interview on December 12th. We discussed his transdisciplinary background, philosophical and artistic practice, and the disruptive, activist potential of theory and practice.

A&G. *You come from a diverse background with a variety of disciplines like cultural, religious and media studies. And now you are an assistant professor at ESPHIL. Could you elaborate on your journey to philosophy?*

CB. I can start by saying -not ironically but thankfully - that it is also a surprise to me to have landed in a philosophy department, due to my German background. There philosophy operates a bit more traditionally

than it does in the Netherlands. I came to this position as its specification of philosophy of media and technology aligns with my prior studies. For my undergraduate I followed a double major in cultural and religious studies at the University of Bremen. Cultural studies, in German *Kulturwissenschaften*, was more akin to cultural and social anthropology. For religious studies, I also followed a lot of courses on Hinduism and Hindu religions. So, there is an empirical side to my early studies. Back then, there were general readings on theories of culture, like Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. But there was also a lot of pop culture analysis happening, specifically in sound studies. This got me interested in cultural studies in general, because (specifically in Britain) it is a field where there was always a strong understanding that theory is neither neutral nor abstract, but socially engaged and political. That was always interesting to me. To turn towards aspects of our everyday lives made a lot of sense; that we must give more attention to what happens in the media, in the public, outside of the realms of classic politics, theory, academia, or the sciences.

Afterwards I ended up going to the UK to Goldsmiths, expecting to do cultural studies. Instead, my first course was mostly continental philosophy. We read Nietzsche, bits and pieces of Marx, and 'How to Make Yourself a Body Without Organs' from *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari. That text really warped me because there are passages about sadism and stitching up your ass and things like that. I asked myself: 'What's going on here?', 'Where am I?' - and then I got hooked and dug deeper. That is when I fell in love with post-structural thinking. I started to read a bunch of philosophy and followed a very fundamental course that was reading Marx's *Capital Volume I* from cover to back. That left quite a mark on me, but I also realized during that period that I wanted to work more on media, pop culture, and sound.

I was very interested in sound. It was the time of dubstep in London and cultural studies allows you to fuse personal and scholarly interests. Back then I sought out people working in media studies, like Luciana Parisi and Matt Fuller. Parisi's *Abstract Sex* and Fuller's *Media Ecologies* were important books for me, as was Rosi Braidotti's *Metamorphoses*. I was interested in questions of gender, queerness, and sound. I was specifically intrigued by how the relation between humans and technology is mediated in sound cultures, particularly in electronic music, and that is what I wrote my master thesis on. It became a philosophical work, thinking about sound as an affective relay between humans, bodies, technologies, and sonic experience as well as the whole culture formation that comes with it.

After my master's I was advised to apply to the Interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities at Concordia University, Montreal. This happened at the 'New Interfaces for Musical Expression' conference in New York, a nerdy field where musicians, engineers, and scientists invent experimental instruments, and exchange on interfaces, affordances, and live performance. In this rather alien field I met a group of scholars and artists from Montreal who encouraged me to apply for the Interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities, I found out this PhD would allow you to study alongside artists. It is a humanities PhD program, but people with an artistic background could do a third of the thesis as a studio component. Here, it became clear to me that I wanted to work deeper into the philosophical line where I started; specifically, French continental philosophy. In my case, it was the ultimate chance to learn French and read texts in their original language, and to do the more genealogical work of going back to Bergson, Simondon, Deleuze - the French line. My project moved away from questions of sound cultures towards research on the politics of affect and aesthetics. I wrote my thesis on relationality and collectivity in art and media, which I am currently reworking into a book publication. This is how I ended up doing trans-disciplinary and philosophical work. It was in line with affect theory, but also metaphysical questions, of the virtual and the actual, questions of emergence, temporality, which all relate to perception and media. That is where I am at.

My current research on media aesthetics, specifically in social movements, concerns more than media as a means to ends of communication and the circulation of opinions, images or discursive shifts. Rather, I study how we are constantly in a state of being affected on a pre-reflexive level, by perceiving and sensing

and then making sense without necessarily being always conscious about how we make sense. Just take a look at how the alt-right in the US works almost virtuously with memes. These memes seem “funny”, but they’re actually racist or misogynist. People don’t even necessarily succumb to that kind of content level, but just the joke of it, and they circulate it. They are part of something without being conscious. Which doesn’t mean these people are innocent or passive or that content doesn’t matter, but I am however, interested in this level where things arouse action without being necessarily classified in clearly defined political terms or in discourse.

A&G. It is interesting to see how you, in your journey, engaged with different practices that have different approaches to knowledge; a philosophical, continental practice and artistic practice. How do you conceive of the relationship between the two?

CB. This already started at Goldsmiths, being one of the most important art schools in the UK, artists would often come into courses and give talks. But my perspective really changed when I started studying alongside artists in Montreal. One of my supervisors, Erin Manning, initiated the *SenseLab*. The *SenseLab*, back then called ‘Laboratory for Thought and Motion’, was born out of a student initiative as a space outside of university where you could engage in, what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call, “study”. It is a more collaborative practice of knowledge production that engages in undogmatic ways with philosophical works built in a non-hierarchical and collaborative structure. More classically one could call these things reading groups, but it’s more than a reading group. It was not only scholarly driven but also had artists come in with different kinds of questions. I always enjoyed how an artist’s perspective on things can trouble the theoretical routines. These routines often assume a certain kind of authority, and troubling these makes you realize the things you think don’t need to be explained anymore!

The *SenseLab* made me realize that art and philosophy share a strong common ground that is creative practice. Philosophy is the practice of inventing and reworking concepts, and art is inventing percepts, affects and experiences. I have collaborated with artists in workshops, events, exhibitions, and performances ever since. To have this dialogue with artists is very much part of my DNA. A lot of my friends are artists. I worked at the Zurich University of the Arts for six years where I was doing theory inside of an art school, which made me think about theory quite differently. I think it was healthy to keep a certain kind of distance, or to not get lulled into a habit or convention that doesn’t make you question what you’re doing. I think if you lose that quality, it becomes dangerous. You might be a super expert, but you might also be incommunicable. And I think that gives away, to a certain degree, some of the potential of what we can do with theory and philosophy.

A&G. You talk about the interplay between theory and art and the disruptive potential of art to theory. Do you think art or theory still has this potential for disruption outside of academia?

CB. The older I get, the less I believe in it... No, I don’t want to be cynical. I think it can. If you look at the history of thought more broadly, it is thinkers and concepts that were changing the world, not only politicians or scientists. Concepts give names to things that didn’t have a name before, and thinkers were sometimes a real threat to political regimes. I mean, especially in the Enlightenment era, we can see this threat to the church, a threat to a certain kind of political authority, because of asking uncomfortable questions. You don’t want to be complacent with simple solutions. I think this is still extremely relevant, and I think our job is to ask “uncomfortable” questions. Deleuze called it ‘the idiot question’, which is not idiotic at all, but asks *what else there is*. When everything has been said and done, when everyone agrees or comes to a disagreement or has concluded, then the idiot asks ‘what else is there?’, I like that, because that is where things are happening. We shouldn’t get too comfortable in our conventions and habits. Theory

that takes place only inside of academia is very comfortable. It becomes a lot like petty games of different schools or whatever. Our global problems are too pressing to fall prey to these petty games. They are important and fun, but then you must see where to make the switch and realize the value of other approaches and of collaborating.

Regarding art, I would say I am more interested in aesthetics in the classic meaning of *aesthesis*, which means sensory perception. This does not necessarily mean institutionalized art, because I think institutionalized art has a specific locus in society and culture, and within a certain kind of capitalist regime where it has a clear function. I think that an aesthetic approach, call it an artistic approach or mode of existence, means posing these uncomfortable questions through the sensuous, perception, and experience. Seeing, experiencing, and sensing things in a way that you cannot place yet, that you cannot allocate to something that you already know, and by that, opening a new perspective on the world. You end up opening a new way of thinking, thinking and feeling are intrinsically related in that respect. I think that's very similar to asking the idiot question. At the same time, I don't want to outright reject art institutions. I think they can provide the time and space for experimenting on inventing new ways of sensing and by doing so of sense-making.

A&G. What do you think is the most radical concept in the field of media studies now?

C. It really depends on where you want to look at, but logistics and platformization are two paradigms that are intensely debated these days. The most interesting debates, I think, come from global systems theories, but also from a Marxist, Operaist and increasingly post- and decolonial perspective. They raise questions of how different processes of production and extraction are integral to each other and how different forms of circulation interlace commodities, operations, and subjects.

Materially, we increasingly rely on rare earths that run our technologies and that are constantly extracted from mostly Indigenous lands around the globe. But we also see how our capacity to sense and feel is constantly extracted and piped into a universal valorization machine. How you sense, feel, and how you respond emotionally to what is happening on your social media threads, is immediately siphoned into these logistics whose most palpable surface are social media platforms. So I would say platform capitalism and the logistical paradigm shift are two intensely debated themes. They can then be related to fields like black, decolonial and post-colonial studies, not only in relation to extractivism but also to the ways that the transatlantic slave trade, plantation, economies, mining relate to each other in a sense that becomes almost totalizing. A total subsumption under these regimes. For me, it is particularly interesting to see where the resistances to these supposed totalizing perspectives are.

One of the ways of engaging these resistances is to look at how other ways of making sense, or sense-making occur, at the underside of these platforms or logistics. This power also means you can organize and communicate in a different way. Together with some colleagues, I am working on the capturing, but also emancipatory, practices that occur along logistics and platforms in a book-project called "Infrastructures of Sense-Making.". I guess this is part of my own reluctance, when it comes to techno-pessimism or apocalyptic visions of doomsday narratives of the Anthropocene.

A&G. What texts do you think exemplify this resistance, or offer a good diagnosis of this issue?

C. Depends on what you want to look at. Within surveillance studies (with works like Shoshana Zuboff *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*), which is a subfield of media studies, I found the book *Dark Matter* by Simone Browne quite relevant, which is on the surveillance of blackness. In that book she creates a compelling analysis of how the conception of blackness and the black body becomes a specific interest, first being

erased from history and then hyper-targeted. Think about the incarceration in the United States, and how the amount of black and brown people in the prisons is disproportionately higher than any other segment of the population. She relates all this back to logistical paradigms of the early transatlantic slave trade that predates what we call the panopticon. Browne traces how the surveillance techniques and technologies of the structure of the slave ship predated the panopticon, which in turn inspired Jeremy Bentham who travelled the Mediterranean Sea on ships that carried slaves under deck. Browne's analysis of the surveillance of blackness also includes many artistic forms of resistance that make the reader feel and understand the logistical intimacies of racism and technology the book exposes.

Another body of work that I find very interesting comes from Indigenous Studies in relation to the field of decolonial theory, especially in North America. Figures like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who has written the wonderful book *As We Have Always Done*, or Glenn Coulthard's, *Red Skin, White Masks* in relation to Fanon's, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Adrian Rifkin's, *Beyond Settler Time*. All are interesting pieces of rethinking the violent effects of an undividable interlocking of coloniality and modernity. Like Simone Browne, these refer to a canon of Western theories of, for instance, surveillance of the body of a certain conception of power, and a certain temporality and historicity that comes with it. These narratives break up some of the Western paradigms and assumptions of how to think what a concept is, what a body is, how space and time relate to each other. And I think an Indigenous perspective on temporality, land or territory can reshape the ground of how to think the media, its practices, as well as activism and aesthetics. I think that work has not been done yet, and that's also my research interest for the future to further analyze these understandings of time, territory and relationality.

I have done some research on increasingly networked feminist social movements in Latin America. One of the common concerns of these movements is the institutionalized violence against women and feminicides. One prominent movement is 'Ni Una Menos', and it relates to problematizing domestic violence and re-appropriating the domestic sphere as a feminist territory, as well as changing anti-abortion laws. The green wristband is part of the signatures or symbols of this movement. As part of these movements, feminists not only achieved the legal structures of some of these countries but also spurred social movements and alliances across the globe, resulting in the *8th of March* feminist movement. A lot of media activism has emerged alongside these processes that also comes out of artistic experimentation. For instance, a Chilean collective called *LasTesis* invented a performance called *Un Violador en Tu Camino*, so 'a rapist in your path'. The performance is a publicly staged choreography, often involving thousands of -mostly female- participants, with lyrics addressing the complicity between the state, its institutions, and patriarchal social structures and gestures pointing at police offices or governmental buildings. Apart from being a highly effective political intervention, *LasTesis* mentions their wish to render feminist theories more accessible as the key motivation for creating the performance. They base their work on writings by Silvia Federici and Maria Lugones. In their performance they create a relay between embodied sensation, a shared experience of violence, but also an empowerment through participation. The performance has been done with a specific kind of aesthetics, the use of blindfold or the bodily posture of squatting. Both of these elements point at intimidating interrogation practices by the Chilean police during the military dictatorship. In addition to the historical reference, the performance creates a physical embodied relay of resistance, which becomes mediated and shared across territories. I think these are re-workings of the platform-capitalized media infrastructure towards different, collective ends, by creating new ways of sensing and feeling across spaces and territories. This is the work that needs to be more theorized in solidarity with such movements, to show the potential. I think there is enough despair and whining about the way social media clicks so well with the more conservative right-wing politics. Working at the interstice between theory, aesthetic experience, and politics leads me to ask how sensation and feeling but also concepts can challenge and change existing infrastructures of power in their capture of our senses and to sense-making.

A&G. Before we move to our little blitz round, we wanted to ask if there were any other concepts that have been on your mind and you would like students to know about you.

C. A concept that has been with me for a while that I try to develop further is what I call activist sense. What is it that activates the sensuous and sense-making processes? How do sensing and sense-making relate to each other, and what, then, is needed to engage in these processes? This is a collective and networked process, which rethinks linear order of temporality and the role of action outside of an individualizing framework. It's not just human or non-human. It is embedded in a whole activating field of parallel occurrences. For me, one of the really important questions is how, for instance, a social media platform can trigger a process which leads to hate, or one that is empowering. How that happens across thinking and feeling simultaneously. Let's take the example of the smartphone, several designers of the big social media platforms admitted in interviews that they create strategies of how to micro trigger certain parts of the brain, yielding effects that lead to certain forms of addiction. This is neuromodulation. It requires a whole array of micro activities and micro activations. The question is what else could be done on this already rich awareness we have of the potential for activation and activity, not in terms of manipulation and not tailored towards capitalist extraction of our sensory-motor capacities. For me these questions point at a critical re-thinking of the temporalities inscribed into digital cultures, and the way they instigate individualization or more collective and shared durations of experience.

The other thing I think is that we have to work hard to include perspectives that come from outside the Western canon. Non-Western philosophies were often a fascination for Western philosophers like Heidegger or Nietzsche and many others. But there are traditions that have been very rich by themselves which are also available in translations. I believe intercultural philosophy as a term has a history at ESPhil, but this conceives of cultures as geographic areas, which is certainly not the way I want to use the term 'culture'. I think we can go beyond the intercultural, to insert other lines of thinking much like Yuk Hui and some other new colleagues do. I think we should build on that and make space of different forms of knowledge and thought.

BLITZ

Deleuze	Haraway
Kant	Bergson
Singularity	Multiplicity
German 19th century	French 20th century
Difference	Repetition
Berlin	New York*
Technology	Social change
The Visible	The Invisible
Dasein	Design

* He doesn't like either very much.