

Circumnavigation: An Interview with Thomas Rickert

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Part Three: Intense Consequences

[background noise]

Nathaniel: Move your taster. What?

Thomas: This is good.

Nathaniel: Which one what is that?

Thomas: Red.

Nathaniel: The red, yeah. That was the first 4Hands I ever had. It was love at first taste.

Thomas: Oh yeah, I can see why.

Nathaniel (Narration): After enjoying the ambience at 4Hands Brewery, as well as their beer, Thomas and I ventured across town, or rather, to the outskirts of town, to the Schlafly Bottleworks in Maplewood, Missouri, where we enjoyed the more beer and finished off the interview.

[music playing: Morphine: "Lilah (Instrumental)"]

Nathaniel: I'm not too worried about the sound in here. OK, so we're moving towards the end. We're now here at Schlafly Bottleworks in Maplewood, Missouri, just outside of St. Louis. We've already placed our order, and we are sitting outside.

Thomas: We are.

Nathaniel: Just a change of ambience.

Thomas: It is.

Nathaniel: There's some nice lights up in here.

Thomas: There are.

Nathaniel: It's a wooden structure. Let's get back to it, shall we?

Thomas: Shall we.

Nathaniel: Let's do this. I guess moving back to this notion of consequences for rhetoric, although in a more positive light in terms of production. So you argue, I'm going to quote again as I'm wont to do, "Persuasion needs to be *intensified*, it needs to be pushed past the borders that rhetoric and philosophy have set for persuasion" (2013, p. 161).

If the consequences we discussed earlier invite us to move away from narrow understandings of rhetoric, in what ways does intensification expand rhetoric? I'm thinking here the phrase you used, borrowing from

Heidegger, where you discussed the, “relation of all relations” (p. 189). What does and intensified rhetoric, or intensified persuasion look like, or what does that entail?

Thomas: On the one hand, it entails that we look at not simply what is immediately disclosed to us, what we take as present because through our methodologies of knowledge production, we take that for our explanation for how things work, how things transpire, from what has transpired, et cetera, et cetera.

In terms of Heidegger, you could say this is simply a permutation of the concealed/unconcealed dichotomy, that what we wrest from concealment never explains all that is. Now, to take us back to some specifics I was trying to work through there, the relation of all relations points to what undergirds language.

Language as it circulates is present to us, and yet, why would we take what is present to us in the circulation of language to be all that is, or that matters, to the conditions of possibility for what language is, or what language does. Language is always born in a situation. That situation is always worldly, and so language is always already...that famous phrase...

Nathaniel: [laughs] Sure...

Thomas: ...such a cliché.

Nathaniel: ...but it works.

Thomas: ...wedded to the world primordially. It emerges from, and within, and helps shape that world. This is no linguistic idealism, it speaks to an ecological relation whose relationality we are just now beginning to see as a problem, and whose specificities we’re trying to get more precision on. In other words, relationality shouldn’t itself be considered this sort of generic term for specifying some sort of connectivity. There must be many forms of connectivity, many forms of relationality.

What are they? If relationality is never neutral, if it’s always motivated in some way, if it always, in other words, affects us, if it always takes it’s bearing from an affectability, that means rhetoricity is already inherent there too. I think one of the first people to see this was [Kenneth] Burke, but I think we can also build on what he initiated, and some people have already started.

Nathaniel: How would you build on Burke? Or how do you in the book? Because you do engage Burke in the chapter on language.

Thomas: Well, Burke as we understand him right now is both modernist and postmodernist. He himself, I think, shifts positions depending on what arguments he’s making, or at what point in his career we’re talking about.

Nathaniel: Yes.

Thomas: There is no “one Burke.”

Nathaniel: No, he’s hard to pin down...

Thomas: Yes, he can be.

Nathaniel: ...and thus write about.

Thomas: This is true. But, nevertheless, when he wants to understand a certain rhetoricity already inherent in the world, despite the fact that he overwhelmingly tends to favor symbolicity, as rhetoricity takes it's...takes it's what? Takes its bearings, takes its general sense perhaps.

Nathaniel: It's attitude?

Thomas: It's attitude. One would need a text really to get more precision here, I think. But, nevertheless, symbolicity is where the game is at.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: I think what we can get when we start delving back into [Martin] Heidegger, and in [Jacques] Derrida to in certain ways, although Derrida presents both advances and problems of his own that I'm not going to get into right now. But in terms of Heidegger and Burke, I think Heidegger sends us back to the world in a different way than Burke, and one that is not as wedded to symbolicity for understanding where rhetoric emerges.

Nathaniel: Yeah, and that then speaks to intensifying it.

Thomas: Exactly.

Nathaniel: Good, well I nailed that one.

[laughter]

Thomas: Well done sir.

[laughter]

Thomas: Perhaps you should speak more closely into the microphone. [laughs]

Nathaniel: I know. That was a spit take ladies and gentlemen. I have one final...

Thomas: Thomas cackles. [laughs]

Nathaniel: I have one final two-part question, and it concerns, and again this is in line with consequences, which is a general pragmatic approach. What does your book do? That's what many of my questions have been getting at. It concerns the political implications of *Ambient Rhetoric*, so part one...

Thomas: Why couldn't you just say what does my book do?

Nathaniel: That's because that's one question, and I needed to pad this...

Thomas: My book leads to my next book. [laughs]

Nathaniel: I need to pad...right, this is...

Thomas: Which was a punt, of course. [laughs]

Nathaniel: Yeah. Let's focus. You conclude your discussion of ambient music, which closes out part one, I believe.

Thomas: Yes.

[music playing: Brian Eno, “2/2”]

Nathaniel: Yes, so you write, “For Eno, ambient music is inherently political, evoking new senses of place and how human beings inhabit it; this includes, more pointedly, a reduced role for human agency reflecting a more distributed, ecological approach to will, action, and consequence” (2013, p. 155). Put rather crudely, how is this political? Or as a critic might ask, how can this be political given the “reduced role” for human agency?

Thomas: Well, the word “reduced” is a loaded term.

Because it assumes that we have a augmented role to begin with. What if that turns out not to be true? What if that turns out to have been fantasmatic all along? Who’s asking these questions? Well a number of people have asked these questions in their own particular idiom, Heidegger asked them, [Michel] Foucault asked them, Derrida asked them. I could go on, Burke asked them. I could go on, [Victor] Vintanza asks them.

I could continue with this litany of names, but perhaps I will not. I think the larger point here is that the sense of reducing is problematic already, and that perhaps it should be more a question of simply getting to a different position where we see in what ways we fit into the larger question of, “What is this thing that we participate in? What is this journey called life in the world?” It’s an ongoing question. We certainly shall not have solved it.

In a way, that’s Heidegger’s, perhaps, best insight. Sometimes he forgot it. But the arrogance of human beings to think, well they know, or that they’re simply the top of the chain or that they’re this or that. Time erodes every such assertion. It will erode ours, it has eroded all those in the past. It will erode those who come after us with their own assertions. Perhaps we should be more mindful of this continual erosion and make that part of what we know.

I think, at that point, we start coming upon where Eno is headed, that there’s a politics there, that politics comes with a certain humility.

Nathaniel: Yes, I’m thinking of the G. K. Chesterton (1908/2013) quote where he talks about, in a true democracy you must have the dead at your table, otherwise democracy just becomes the tyranny of whoever happens to be alive.

Thomas: Or have the biggest bank accounts.

Nathaniel: Sure.

Thomas: Yes, agreed.

Nathaniel: No, but in the sense that if it’s open, it remains political in the sense that it’s debatable and contingent and rhetorical.

Thomas: The quote that I quoted from Eno is what part of a larger quote where he references some specific bands from the ‘60s and ‘70s where the idea was to create a persona that was larger than life, that was very ego driven, to go along with that, the music was to be very loud.

One of the classic examples, as far as I'm concerned, is the Rolling Stones' album, *Let It Bleed*. That, on the inner sleeve in the liner notes, it says in capital letters, "PLAY THIS MUSIC LOUD." Well, there's a mindset that goes with that. Then the mindset says, "We have something to say and we're best heard at loud volumes that drives out everything else."

Eno's aesthetic is almost the exact opposite. It's just to disappear into the environment so that you don't even have to pay attention necessarily to what Eno's produced, perhaps something else becomes more important.

In some ways, one could argue Eno's music is far more, one hesitates to say, "Intellectual," because that's not quite the term that I'm reaching for. It certainly puts one on a path towards a sense that intellectuality doesn't necessarily come from a subject. Intellectuality is itself dispersed and that we can learn from that.

Once again, one immediately sees that, not only does aesthetics springs forth from that but politics can spring from that but it doesn't give you a guide command.

Nathaniel: No, not politically in terms of politic program.

Thomas: Correct. One last point, one can make a connection to Latour's (1993) "Parliament of Things" at this point.

Nathaniel: One should.

Thomas: One should. I'm going to make a rather bold claim and say, Eno got to where Latour wants to be, a couple decades earlier and got further. For Latour's "Parliament of Things," it's the humans who have to bring the things in. For Eno, things are already there. They're part of that the music is, hence they're part of what the politics is.

Nathaniel: Would this be, to get back to an earlier question I asked.

Thomas: Barad, Karen Barad's (2007) marvelous work, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

Nathaniel: That's a tome by the way.

Thomas: It is a tome, but she makes this point, as well, in her own idiom but nevertheless she makes it.

Nathaniel: Would this be again, to get at the question of we could make that the claim that perhaps Latour here is more ecological as opposed to ambient which is he's not as attuned to the background that makes the human or nonhuman distinction show up in the first place?

Thomas: Well, I think he's very aware that we're hybrids, but I also think that because he's working out of science some of his insights are modulated by the work he has to do.

I don't think we should read this as a critique of Latour at all. It simply points to how a scientist and a musician both have very legitimate insights into the same issues or interested as reiterations in terms of materiality and ecology. But they approach them differently and have their own levels of insight.

Why should we be surprised to find that a musician can sometimes go further? Why should we be surprised at that? We shouldn't.

Nathaniel: Certainly not.

Thomas: There is a marvelous quote...I'm going to close on this.

Nathaniel: [laughs]

Thomas: I said I was going to close on this earlier, right?

Nathaniel: Right. Sure. Yeah. This was you already made your final point.

Thomas: Just as we have no real beginning we have no real ending. It's the never-ending story.

Nathaniel: It's going to end when the battery runs out. I think that's what's happening here.

Thomas: Or we need new beer.

Nathaniel: Sure.

Thomas: There is a tribute album to Deleuze called "In Memoriam: Gilles Deleuze," or Giles Deleuze, however you pronounce "Gilles."

Nathaniel: I like "Giles" because it's almost certainly wrong.

Thomas: Yes. "Giles" has to be wrong because that's British. That's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Nathaniel: I'm going to edit that out.

Thomas: Yeah. How dare you?

Nathaniel: We all love Joss Whedon here.

Thomas: Yes, we do.

Nathaniel: You were saying.

Thomas: There is a track on that album that says, you have a computer voice similar to the voice of the physicist Stephen Hawking.

Nathaniel: Stephen Hawking.

Thomas: The voice says, "What I see is thinking. What I hear is thinking too." What I love about this quote is it suggests music thinks.

Nathaniel: It's very aural.

Thomas: But it is also very material. Why shouldn't we think materialism thinks too?

Nathaniel: I have one final question. Well, it's actually part two of this question. Your book does end; this is actually the final chapter of the second part of the book, before the afterword. It's symmetrical with the Eno chapter, which ends with what we might describe as a political project, the project of sufficiency.

Given that we are here at the end of our brewery tour, which has only included two by the way because we liked where we were at. I'm just about to order my final beer so that I can get Thomas home safely.

Sufficiency seems to be as good a point to end on as any other. I guess, as we conclude this interview if you could talk about what “sufficiency” is as opposed to something like “efficiency.” How did you come to see it as connected to *Ambience* and to *Ambient Rhetoric* and to see it as a penultimate chapter before an afterward?

Why did it strike you, A, as important to begin with and why put it in that slot as the book is building towards its conclusion that you saw sufficiency as wrapped up in all of this?

Thomas: One of the ways we might understand the political effects with presence right now in our contemporary climate is that this present to us is what burns brightest in terms of what advances our lives or what shows up in the public sphere. These seem to revolve around a certain number of motifs: fear, the need for security, money and the fear of not having enough.

Now, there are political reasons for much of this. You can point to court cases, you can point to a lot of things. But the larger point is what we see as most present is also tethered to efficiency. If money is what is the most direct and efficient and most visible means of getting what you want, why wouldn't that show up as the most important thing?

However, if we look at money within a larger ecology of self, and if we consider efficiency of self as part of that ecology, we start seeing that efficiency starts running up against its own limits because it starts ignoring the very conditions of its possibility. Just following through on efficiency's own precepts, I think sooner or later it has to turn into sufficiency.

In other words, I really think that sufficiency is efficiency given a fuller spectrum of disclosive practices. Getting those into the spotlight, making those show up, that's part of the work of rhetoric, rhetoric that can take place in many forms, including simply practices.

Nathaniel: This would be an intensified rhetoric, would make sufficiency show up.

Thomas: Yes. Bingo.

Nathaniel: Which is part of the argument that you make.

Thomas: Sufficiency is simply efficiency intensified.

Nathaniel: Which is the argument you make about the value of...

Thomas: Rather than blocked.

Nathaniel: Yeah. The value of the metaphor of ambience are the things that it discloses.

Thomas: Perhaps the concept of ambience can illuminate the blockages.

Nathaniel: I see. That's all I have.

Thomas: That's all I have.

Nathaniel: We'll leave it on just in case something else happens. Then we can turn it off when we go to get our next beer.

Thomas: Fair enough.

Nathaniel: Well, thank you for this opportunity.

Thomas: Thank you.

Nathaniel: We're shaking hands. This was a pleasure.

Thomas: That was actually...It was work, but it was worth it. I didn't know half the shit I said.

Nathaniel: You were working. I could see you working.

Thomas: I was working.

Nathaniel: But it was tight, it was concise.

Thomas: I was trying to be. I was working, but in a good way. So were you.

Nathaniel: Well, I had a script. That helped.

Thomas: Yes. You were still working. You gave me cues where I needed them.

Nathaniel: It was fun to put the interview together.

Thomas: That means you were attending, which can be hard.

Nathaniel: No, it was actually, not to tell a sob story, but putting the interview together was difficult.

Thomas: I know.

Nathaniel: What do you pick out? There was a lot in that book that did not get covered in this interview.

Thomas: How could it?

Nathaniel: It couldn't.

Thomas: I know.

Nathaniel: Tensed the ambient version of the...

Thomas: I'm glad you picked out the music. I fear that the music is going to get discounted, or ignored.

Nathaniel: It's the fulcrum, because it's right there at the end of part four...I mean part one as chapter four. But even as I ask the question, the ways in which politics shows up in that chapter, for me, resonates with the way it shows up in the sufficiency chapter.

Thomas: I layer show much music into that book. I layer as much as I possibly can. Well, not as much as I possibly can.

Nathaniel: I still have the "I Don't Like Monday" song stuck in my head months after reading this book.

[“I Don't Like Mondays” by The Boomtown Rats begins to play]

Thomas: That is a chilling song.

Nathaniel: It is. It's also very good.

Thomas: It is a good song.

Nathaniel: It's good. Not many covers. Did I tell you there's a cover?

Thomas: There is?

Nathaniel: I told you about this.

Thomas: I didn't know there was a cover, by who?

Nathaniel: By Tori Amos.

Thomas: Really?

Nathaniel: Yes. I believe it's Tori Amos. You'll have to Google it later.

Thomas: Let's play it later when we get back to Casa Rivers.

Nathaniel: Will do. I'm going to layer some of this music into the interview.

Thomas: Oh, cool.

Nathaniel: "Music for Airports" will obviously be playing during the Brian Eno portion. So what are you doing next, now that I got you on the line?

Thomas: [laughs] The pre-history of rhetoric.

Nathaniel: Which makes sense.

Thomas: It's going to have a lot to do with caves.

Nathaniel: Which plays a role in the opening moves of your book, looking at the cave paintings.

Thomas: Bingo. There's a couple things that showed up in the ambient book that haven't let go of me. They've led me on to the third book. It's really a straight outgrowth of dealing with caves and dealing with Empedocles' four fold. They are not the four elements, by the way.

Nathaniel: Oh, they're not?

Thomas: Nope. That's Aristotle's translation, stochi, or whatever, "elements." The word Empedocles uses is "rhizomata."

Nathaniel: Really?

Thomas: Really.

Nathaniel: That's mind blowing.

Thomas: It is. "Roots."

Nathaniel: That seems fitting, though, because it seems to be that *Acts of Enjoyment* was more a culmination of the project of reexamining cultural studies pedagogy. It seems, at least as I read it, that the *Ambient Rhetoric* book is breaking new ground. The idea that your next book would be an outgrowth of that makes a lot of sense, because *Ambient Rhetoric* for me has been very generative. It begins to supply a vocabulary for thinking through a lot of these different threads that I think people are working with.

Thomas: I didn't understand this when I was starting the book. When I wrote the "Ambient" essay I didn't know I had a book, I was just writing an essay. It wasn't until I'd finished the "Acts" book that I realized...Well, I had an opportunity. I had an opportunity to apply to a center for humanities fellowship at Purdue. I was thinking, well, what can I do as a project?

It wasn't until I stewed around and thought that I realized that there were some common denominators in the various essays I had published while I was seeing *Acts of Enjoyment* into print. Things started coalescing from there.

Then I realized I had a book. But many of the chapters I had originally planned when I wrote up the fellowship prospectus never got written, and I started writing different chapters. That's what became the book. This book is just an outgrowth of that.

Nathaniel: Because it is funny how well those four chapters in part one work within the book...

Thomas: But they weren't planned that way.

Nathaniel: ...But knowing that they were all discrete projects in a wide variety of places.

Thomas: I guess I was just working through a similar problem through different trajectories.

Nathaniel: It's an ambient book construction, which is probably how a lot of books work.

Thomas: Probably.

Nathaniel: Which is, again, one of the arguments you make in the book that ambience is, really, not anything new. It's by virtue of particular technologies and we've become more...

Thomas: You got that very interesting Greek concept *periarchon*.

Nathaniel: Elaborate?

Thomas: It conveys some atmospheric sense that's tethered to the cosmos as if...Which makes sense. You can understand the logos against that background. The logos already convey various modalities of cosmic order, language, argument, reason, but they're all interconnected in some way.

Nathaniel: I'm trying to think. There's an interesting...

Thomas: When they do the Greek version of the Bible, "In the beginning was the word." What's the word they used for "word"? Logos, there's a reason.

[laughter]

Thomas: Which already says there's a logos for their use of logos. There's a reason for that.

Nathaniel: What I actually kept coming to, and I couldn't find a way to, really, work this in thoroughly, is when we were discussing your book in a reading group that I assigned it to. We had this great conversation about the chicken and the egg problem.

Which became this...We know one of these came first, but there's no way to imagine them, the un-resolvability of the chicken and the egg question. This reading group...

Thomas: It's a false question.

Nathaniel: Yeah. It became this way of thinking through this notion of ambience. There's this thing that comes before but, and this is what you write in *Acts of Enjoyment*, it doesn't offer the transcendence that would rescind the offer.

Which is in many ways, if one were to imagine the chicken and the egg question as not a false one, that's what that question desires.

Thomas: [laughs] Yeah.

Nathaniel: Some way out of a prior affectability. That would be the one thing you could point to as that's where they came from.

Anyway, I do this because the chicken and the egg question blows my mind. It's one of those hilarious children's questions that if you think about it long enough, it actually, really does start to hurt.

Thomas: Of course, it does because it depends on a certain logic or undergirding order that allows that question to emerge within that order. It's a paradox. You can't resolve it as long as you're working within those precepts.

Nathaniel: So you're saying it's the egg?

[laughter]

Nathaniel: Am I interpreting you correctly?

Thomas: I don't know.

Nathaniel: Something has to lay the egg.

Thomas: I'll tell you, there's a guy I've been reading whose name escapes me.

Nathaniel: [laughs]

Thomas: I'll email you the guy's names...

[crosstalk]

Nathaniel (Narration): The name is Rupert Sheldrake (2012) and he's the author of *Science Set Free*.

Thomas: ...I can't think of the guy's name. He's a scientist, too. He argues that the notion that the universe is built on fundamental eternal unchanging laws is wrong. He argues that the universe is habitual. He points to some very interesting evidence to back himself up.

Nathaniel: Like a scientist would.

Thomas: Yes. Now, I haven't investigated further to know to what extent he's right or not. But on the surface, some of the evidence looks very intriguing.

For instance, there was a period of time starting in the late 20s and on into the 30s, where it seemed like the speed of light slowed down about 20 kilometers an hour for about 14, 15 years. Then went back to its normal...

Nathaniel: Sure, sped up again.

Thomas: Yeah. He's saying, the speed of light, it's constant, but it's not a constant constant.

[laughter]

Thomas: It fluctuates a bit—not a lot, but a little bit.

Nathaniel: Which as a sophist, you totally enjoyed that answer. It's a constant, but like a constant, constant.

Thomas: He, also, does a lot work with chemistry. You synthesize chemical compounds in particular ways by putting them together and then they synthesize. But sometimes, there's different ways putting the compounds together can go. And they can make this one thing or they can make this other thing.

It seems like, and there's evidence to support this, once you create a new compound in one part of the world, it starts showing up all over the world. In fact, chemists started making up myths about how you were carrying the chemicals in your facial hair and whatnot when you were traveling into other people's labs.

Nathaniel: Which is the cigar smoke example.

Thomas: Right. But this guy's argument is that the universe is habitual. Once you create a new pattern, it spreads. One of his more intriguing examples—and this comes back to your egg question, this is why I thought of it. And again, I have no way of evaluating this as true or not. It's certainly intriguing.

Nathaniel: That's enough.

Thomas: If you go back to the current model of the creation of the universe, which is the big bang theory. In other words, it's an egg theory.

You have an egg or you have the...What's the line, the small, intensely hot dot? Whatever the quote is. That expanded rapidly and that became the universe. As that expanded the laws of the universe, as we understand them, manifested themselves as unchanging and universal.

When it was the infinitesimally, small, intensely hot dot, could you still have the laws of the universe? Which came first...

Nathaniel: Yeah. Right. It's the same....

Thomas: ...the laws or the bang? It's the chicken or the egg. This guy's argument is that if the universe is habitual, you could explain that. If the laws are eternal...

Nathaniel: Thank you.

Thomas: ...and constant, you cannot.

Nathaniel: Wow. That was last call.

Thomas: We're getting another.

Nathaniel: I do know what that means.

[music plays: Ween, "The Fucked Jam"]

Thomas: We're getting another?

Nathaniel: Yes.

Thomas: We're shutting this off?

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: Bye.

Nathaniel: Good night everybody.

Thomas: Good night.

[background music: Ween, "The Fucked Jam"]

Thomas: Well, we've ended on a bang.

[silence]