
(More or Less) Democratic Forms Relational Aesthetics and the Rhetoric of Globalization

by Pat McIntyre

FRENCH ART CRITIC AND CURATOR NICOLAS BOURRIAUD'S BOOK OF essays on contemporary art, *Relational Aesthetics*, attempts to theorize the common ground underlying the practices of artists that emerged in the international art world in the years following the reunification of Europe and the fall of Soviet communism. In this context, Bourriaud traces stylistic links connecting the practices of artists as diverse as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Maurizio Cattelan, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. However, Bourriaud does not limit the relevance of his theories to just the works and practices of these particular artists. In fact, Bourriaud manifestly proposes in *Relational Aesthetics* that the art of Europe's radically new social, historical, and economic situation must be totally free from the baggage of the "inventory of yesterday's concerns." How, Bourriaud asks, are we to understand Tiravanija's noodle-cooking exploits in collectors' homes, or Vanessa Beecroft's exhibitions of half-naked women lined-up in galleries, or Pierre Huyghe's film-less casting sessions, if not with "interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts"?'¹

Bourriaud claims that a new social framework, what he calls the "society of extras," necessitates the open-ended, and hence "more or less democratic" formal structures of relational artworks. I will show how his historical reconstruction mimics a neoliberal rhetoric of globalization, whether deliberately or not, and therefore patently skews the nature of

the human relations that his program claims to be cultivating. As art historian Claire Bishop suggests, this leads to the inadvertent proscription of hypothetical viewers into a paradoxical space of forced participation. This calls into question the actual value of the relations in question.

Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as a “theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt.”² This determines the relational artwork to be “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”³ The success or failure of a work of relational art is predicated upon its “criterion of co-existence,” or its ability to foster relations among its participants. This idea is defined as follows: “All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed in it. So there is a question we are entitled to ask in front of any aesthetic production: ‘Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?’ A form is more or less democratic.”⁴ It is evident, then, for Bourriaud, that relationality draws from elements of participation and viewer interactivity evident in works of art. Bourriaud emphasizes that these social relationships are produced by the art works in question. But according to Claire Bishop, in Bourriaud’s analysis, “The quality of the relationships in ‘relational aesthetics’ are never examined or called into question.”⁵

Bourriaud explains that the game of art is always changing its rules, and because of this, new standards of aesthetic judgment need to be developed concurrently.⁶ Bourriaud sees today’s artists as working under a very similar paradigm to the original avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, but whereas earlier vanguards announced utopias, Bourriaud asserts that artists working under relational principles are providing concrete ameliorations: “[T]he role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.”⁷

The idiosyncratic epochal label, “the society of extras,” that Bourriaud assumes is operational, is a condition of utmost contemporaneity so as to

render most art-historical precedents for relational aesthetics anachronistic. He explains that the society of extras is best understood as an outgrowth of a previous condition, popularized in the radical social theory of Guy Debord as “the society of the spectacle.” But whereas, for Debord, the individual subject was confined to a passivity, not unlike that of an audience member, because “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image,”⁸ the social being in the society of extras is compelled to a minimum activity of participation in the reproduction and dissemination of the spectacle’s form.⁹

Bourriaud metaphorically describes this “radical upheaval” from the society of the spectacle to the society of extras as a transition from a television model to a video game model, and historically locates the shift at approximately the moment of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which was symbolized in the news media by the fall of the Berlin wall, in which state resistances to capital across the globe were supposedly quelled and followed by an influx of embrasures in both economic and social organization.¹⁰ It is against this backdrop that relational art is said to make its intervention as “learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.”¹¹ Falling in line with an overarching video game model of society, Bourriaud claims that the various forms of art become colonized by and turn into “social interstices.” Marx had explained the social interstice as a marginalized area of the economy that is exempt from the law of profit. Bourriaud sees in these quasi-heterotopias the fundamental condition of art and its exhibition.

The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system. This is the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibition in the arena of representational commerce: it creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the “communications zones” that are imposed upon us.¹²

However, Bourriaud has been significantly challenged on his video game model by other critics who point out that works identified with the program of relational aesthetics simply seem to take as their model of production the service industry. George Baker, a contributing editor of the journal *October*, has pointed out that “At its most ambitious, Bourriaud’s project amounts to a theory of advanced art in the era of a putatively new service economy, a context within which, it is claimed, art abandons its prior (industrial) object forms and shifts to the immaterial form of services.”¹³ Artist and writer Andrea Fraser has also observed the proliferation of the “immaterial form of services” in much recent art, a theme she finds to be made explicit in the post-war milieu of vanguard art production. Indeed, “one could conclude that almost every significant attempt by artists of the past thirty years to transform the conditions and relations of their activity, whether through the redefinition of art works or of the competencies required to produce them, has resulted in a tendency toward forms of work (or working) that include an aspect of service provision.”¹⁴ Significantly, Fraser questions the present’s singularity with regard to service economics through recourse to observations made by classical economists, that “services were always simply everything [...] that was not industrially organized; that was not or did not result in a durable, transferable, product; that was not productive of profit.”¹⁵

One must also take note of how cozy Bourriaud’s *Weltanschauung* is with the *Zeitgeist* of neoliberal globalization. In the introduction to *Art in Europe: 1990-2000*, Gianfranco Maraniello lays out political, social, and economic contexts for current European art that are similar to Bourriaud’s. Maraniello, like Bourriaud, cites the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequent reintegration of Europe into a unified military and economic actor as symbolic of the European condition of the decade. He explains that the resulting enthusiasm for unification and subsequent market triumphalism of Western economic powers initiated an international conversation under the banner of what came to be known as “globalization.” The gist of this global world is that capital and communication could go from any one place to any other, at any given time, virtually instantaneously. The glo-

balized world is said to render obsolete, or at least transparent, artificial boundaries such as the nation-state, and also more ambiguous phenomena such as “Western identity.”¹⁶

However, what globalization actually *is* is contested. Frederick Cooper has emphasized that capitalist enterprise was just as “global” two hundred years ago. He notes the vast extent of the Dutch East India company and other various joint-stock companies of the early-modern period. He also points out that international patterns of labor migration were at their peaks during the one hundred years prior to the first World War, indicating that movement across the borders of nation-states is, historically speaking, becoming more, not less, difficult, thereby rendering present ideas of trans-nationality unfounded.¹⁷

Bourriaud is certainly not alone in his enthusiastic reception of globalization’s rhetoric. Maraniello points out the proliferation of many large international art exhibitions over the course of the decade, such as Documenta X and XI, and Manifesta 3. One can also cite the more recent spike in the number of international art fairs in support of this trend. Igor Zabel, the organizer of Manifesta 3, describes the nature of his exhibition program as “a radically open and flexible structure,” and in paradigmatic fashion, locates the show’s genesis “in the early 1990s,” that is to say, “the result of the new enthusiasm and optimism after the fall of the Berlin Wall.”¹⁸ This curatorial ethos is echoed in the institutional mission authored by Valerie Cassel, director of the Visiting Artists Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and part of the Whitney’s 2000 Biennial curatorial team. Cassel emphasizes “a construct that incorporates people, not objects, as points of discourse and interrogation,” in an exchange program exploring the “new verbal and visual languages, evidenced in the work of a new generation of artists, whose sensibilities have been shaped by personal journeys and experiences that move beyond a nationalist understanding of themselves.” These innovations are of course heralded as the result of “the major political, social, and economic changes.”¹⁹ This ubiquity of a neoliberal rhetoric of globalization could indicate an attempt to attract the same monied buyers,

investors, and donors that are profiting from the logic of globalization in other economic spheres. Furthermore, this collusion of curatorial lexicons seems to be indicative of an ethos of the entire arts management industry, which Andrea Fraser slyly pairs with a “consistent and durable demand” for the type of work that lends itself to community-friendly exhibition structures. Considerably overlapping with Bourriaud’s project, Fraser has labeled these practices “project work”:

The demand for projects undertaken in response to specific curatorial concepts could be related to a need on the part of curators and their organizations to induce the “usual suspects” to produce something special in the context of the exponential expansion of contemporary art venues—and thus exhibitions—in the 1980s, as well as of the corps of curators, swelled by the graduates of at least a half dozen new curatorial training programs.²⁰

One may perhaps wonder if Bourriaud and the new curatorialism’s identification of a new era filtered through the code words of an increasingly globalized economy and its projected track of spreading capital to every corner of the globe results merely in an attempt to renew art against a re-conceptualization of mimesis (albeit one taking social relations as its model): this is because Bourriaud seeks to create a similitude adjacent to the open-ended, transnational, and blurred relations he perceives to be already immanent to the book of the world.

Claire Bishop asserts that despite the positive aspirations of most open-ended art work, upon further examination of the quality of relations in some early work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, relational practice paradoxically remains a paragon of non-democratic interaction. Bishop cites Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s qualification of democracy upon the retention of antagonisms within the field of social relations. According to Bishop’s reading, Bourriaud’s own criterion of co-existence, which is “more or less democratic,”²¹ becomes impossible to achieve within the structure of relational art.

In their post-Marxist staple, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics*, Laclau and Mouffe define de-

mocracy as necessarily retaining elements of antagonism, that is to say, dissent and the persistence of difference. It is precisely because all differences are smoothed over in acts of generosity and artificial community in Tiravanija's work, such as the cooking of food for audiences, that it serves to erase all democratic possibility for its participants and inscribes the viewer within a homogenous, perhaps even totalitarian, experience that is predetermined by the so-called "open" structure of the work. One enters a gallery where the only way to behold the work of art is to eat Tiravanija's noodles, and there's no way around it. Bishop's problem with this shift of aesthetic criteria to one of "co-existence," is that it values merely the possibility for a dialogue, with no regard for the quality and power structures operating within and around that dialectic. For example, it is an irony of Tiravanija's apparent generosity that the majority of participants were power-lunching collectors and art-world professionals.²²

Bourriaud also seems to want to ignore the vast history of participatory art. Participatory art has an enormous precedent in twentieth century art practices. I will limit my citations to a few of hundreds of examples. During the 1950s in Europe, for instance, we see clear evidence of pre-cursors to relational aesthetics. At that time, one would have found both Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni dealing directly with issues of performativity and viewer participation. One of Klein's most notorious works, *Le Vide*,²³ consisted of emptying a Parisian gallery and then offering tours of the immaterial psychic energies he had artistically "imbued" upon the space, while at the same time serving a blue drink to gallery-goers that caused their urine to temporarily turn blue. Additionally, it's hard to imagine a more open-ended strategy and structure for an artwork than Manzoni's "living sculptures,"²⁴ for which the artist graced ordinary people's bodies with his signature and declared them living works of art.²⁵

It is, none the less, undoubtedly beneficial to see how Bourriaud's observations apply to many advanced artists working today. The practice of Pierre Huyghe, an artist Bourriaud frequently cites, and his major work *Streamside Day Follies*,²⁶ seems to fulfil the program of relational aesthetics to the brim. The work consisted in the invention and execu-

tion of a celebration, “Streamside Day,” for the residents of the housing development, Streamside Knolls, in upstate New York. The celebration included a parade, music, food, and speeches by local community figure-heads. Huyghe videoed the festivities and created an installation at the Dia Center in New York that projected the footage on to large movable screens.²⁷

By identifying his critical project as “ceasing to take shelter behind the sixties art history,”²⁸ Bourriaud would seem to want to shut-down observations that reveal Huyghe’s debt to art history. The work draws on performative themes present in the Happenings of Alan Kaprow, and its formal strategy, that is to say, its existence between the “reality” of the Streamside Knolls community and its “representation” in video and installation at the Dia, was a strategy exploited by Robert Smithson’s “site” and “non-site” interventions and tableaux of the late sixties and early seventies. The mature works of Smithson’s corpus drew their strength from existing simultaneously in disparate physical locations, in photographic (and sometimes cinematographic) documentation, as well as his theoretical writings. Each of these manifestations can be seen to self-consciously comment upon an inability to totally encompass a work of art within a single media’s strictures. In his *Spiral Jetty*,²⁹ for example, a physical encounter with Smithson’s creation was literally one of an oscillating point of view around as one navigated the jetty’s curving arc by foot. In the various aerial photographs of the piece, the quasi-scientific topographical documentation is undermined by the hyperbolic grafting of the work’s bizarre shape onto an actual landscape, while still managing to convincingly suggest an affinity with such ancient monuments as the Nazca line-drawings or the Native snake mounds of Ohio.

THE MOVE TO DOWNPLAY THE WEIGHT OF ART-MAKING’S DEBT TO history is certainly nothing new to the tradition of art writing; Baudelaire famously cautioned the “painter of modern life” of the mid-nineteenth century against steeping himself too greatly in the past for fear of forgetting the essential beauty of “being present.”³⁰ However,

this critical move may also present an opportunity for darker aspects of modernity to emerge. Bourriaud, perhaps sensing this threat, contrasts his open-ended formal prescriptions against the totalitarianism of closed forms at every opportunity. After emphasizing the social models of relational art and its abilities to foster dialogue, Bourriaud reminds us “for the record, that the forms produced by totalitarian regimes are peremptory and closed in on themselves [...]. Otherwise put, they do not give the viewer a chance to complement them.”³¹ However, Bourriaud’s rejection of history might put him on shakier ground than this rejection of totalitarianism would lead us to believe. One may recall Futurism’s by now century-old clarion call to smash the museums and sing the praises of speed, machines, and industrialization.³² What history also documents is the utter elation of the Futurist movement for the violence of war, which perhaps explains why so many of its members perished in the trenches of World War I. But some did survive, among them the poet Marinetti, who would eventually champion Mussolini’s rise to power.

To be fair, Bourriaud’s work is a serious attempt to restructure our understanding of the social and historical conditions that effect art making, and he therefore directly engages with new possibilities for post-avant garde (or post-neo-avant garde) artistic practice in the wake of the drastic transformations in political and economic spheres. Bourriaud’s idiosyncratic understanding can be seen as an attempt to go beyond the aporia evident in other theories of avant-garde art, such as Peter Bürger’s, which “argues that post-avant-garde art has only the ability to dispose of all traditional stylistic and aesthetic forms. No new form emerging from the avant-garde is theoretically privileged over traditional forms.”³³ With his consistent emphases on interactivity and performativity, Bourriaud turns this observation on its head. But, because relational aesthetics becomes symptomatic of the rhetoric of globalization’s attempt to base social relations solely on transnational, intersubjective, and other ambiguous processes, it has skewed the value he espouses for relationality. This does not necessarily imply that traditional (or, for Bourriaud, “sixties”) terms of inquiry need to be reinscribed, or that these terms need to reflect some

essential truth of our historical situation; on the contrary, as Laclau and Mouffe suggest, the only concern here is with the “nodal points” of a symbolic reality. By carrying a certain structural weight for symbolic representations of reality and the antagonisms that cut through them, any terms of analysis or “rallying points” need only operate temporarily.³⁴ Because he assumes that a mere potentiality for interaction in a work of art is inherently democratic, Bourriaud fails to acknowledge that a truly democratic form might only be possible when antagonistic identities are sustained and not suppressed, even if by acts of kindness. ❁

NOTES

1 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance et al. (Les Presses du Reel: France, 2002), 7-8.

2 Ibid., 112.

3 Ibid., 113.

4 Ibid., 109.

5 Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, (2004): 65.

6 Bourriaud, 11.

7 Ibid., 13.

8 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 24.

9 Bourriaud, 113.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 16.

13 George Baker, “Untitled Editorial Note,” *October* 110, (2004): 50.

14 Andrea Fraser, “What’s Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?” *October* 80 (1997): 114.

15 Ibid., 114

16 Gianfranco Maraniello, ed., *Art in Europe: 1990-2000* (Milan: Skira, 2002), 9-11.

17 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005), 91-112.

18 Igor Zabel, “Manifesta 3 / Beyond Boundaries: Rethinking Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (2000): 19-21.

19 Valerie Cassel, “Cry of My Birth / Beyond Boundaries: Rethinking Contemporary

- Art Exhibitions,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (2000): 4, 5.
- 20 Fraser, 115, 116.
- 21 Bourriaud, 109.
- 22 Bishop, 65.
- 23 Yves Klein, *Le Vide*, mixed media (1958).
- 24 Piero Manzoni, *Living Sculptures*, mixed media (c.1961).
- 25 Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being 2nd Ed.* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 224, 342.
- 26 Pierre Huyghe, *Streamside Day Follies*, mixed media (2003).
- 27 George Baker, “An Interview with Pierre Huyghe,” *October* 110 (2004): 80-106
- 28 Bourriaud, 7.
- 29 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, mixed media (1970).
- 30 Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (Phaidon, 1995), 1.
- 31 Bourriaud, 109.
- 32 F. T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” *Selected Writings*, trans. R.W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 39-44.
- 33 Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde,” *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Peter Bürger (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), xl.
- 34 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, London, 1985), 93-148.