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## Excerpts from

### *Relational Aesthetics*

(Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Presses du réel, 2002. ISBN 2840660601)

#### **Relational form**

Artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence. It is the critic's task to study this activity in the present. A certain aspect of the programme of modernity has been fairly and squarely wound up (and not, let us hasten to emphasize in these bourgeois times, the spirit informing it). This completion has drained the criteria of aesthetic judgment we are heir to of their substance, but we go on applying them to present-day artistic practices. The new is no longer a criterion, except among latter-day detractors of modern art who, where the much-execrated present is concerned, cling solely to the things that their traditionalist culture has taught them to loathe in yesterday's art. In order to invent more effective tools and more valid viewpoints, it behooves us to understand the changes nowadays occurring in the social arena, and grasp what has already changed and what is still changing. How are we to understand the types of artistic behaviour shown in exhibitions held in the 1990s, and the lines of thinking behind them, if we do not start out from the same situation as the artists?

#### **Contemporary artistic practice and its cultural plan**

The modern political era, which came into being with the Enlightenment, was based on the desire to emancipate individuals and people. The advances of technologies and freedoms, the decline of ignorance, and improved working conditions were all billed to free humankind and help to usher in a better society. There are several versions of modernity, however. The 20th century was thus the arena for a struggle between two visions of the world: a modest, rationalist conception, hailing from the 18th century, and a philosophy of spontaneity and liberation through the irrational (Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists), both of which were opposed to authoritarian and utilitarian forces eager to gauge human relations and subjugate people. Instead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalisation of the production process. So the modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy.

Twentieth century avant-garde, from Dadaism to the Situationist International, fell within the tradition of this modern project (changing culture, attitudes and mentalities, and individual and social living conditions), but it is as well to bear in mind that this project was already there before them, differing from their plan in many ways. For modernity cannot be reduced to a rationalist teleology, any more than it can to political messianism. Is it possible to disparage the desire to improve living and working conditions, on the pretext of the bankruptcy of tangible attempts to do as much – shored up by totalitarian ideologies and naive visions of history? What used to be called the avant-garde has, needless to say, developed from the ideological swing of things offered by modern rationalism; but it is now re-formed on the basis of quite different

philosophical, cultural and social presuppositions. It is evident that today's art is carrying on this fight, by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicated by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian. If opinion is striving to acknowledge the legitimacy and interest of these experiments, this is because they are no longer presented like the precursory phenomena of an inevitable historical evolution. Quite to the contrary, they appear fragmentary and isolated, like orphans of an overall view of the world bolstering them with the clout of an ideology. It is not modernity that is dead, but its idealistic and teleological version.

Today's fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday's, barring the fact that the avant-garde has stopped patrolling like some scout, the troop having come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties. Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes.

The ambition of artists who include their practice within the slipstream of historical modernity is to repeat neither its forms nor its claims, and even less assign to art the same functions as it. Their task is akin to the one that Jean-François Lyotard allocated to post-modern architecture, which "is condemned to create a series of minor modifications in a space whose modernity it inherits, and abandon an overall reconstruction of the space inhabited by humankind."<sup>1</sup> What is more, Lyotard seems to half-bemoan this state of affairs: he defines it negatively, by using the term "condemned." And what, on the other hand, if this "condemnation" represented the historical chance whereby most of the art worlds known to us managed to spread their wings, over the past ten years or so? This "chance" can be summed up in just a few words: **learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution. Otherwise put, the 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.** Althusser said that one always catches the world's train on the move; Deleuze, that "grass grows from the middle" and not the bottom or the top. The artist dwells in the circumstances the present offers him, so as to turn the setting of his life (his links with the physical and conceptual world) into a lasting world. He catches the world on the move: he is a tenant of culture, to borrow Michel de Certeau's expression.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, modernity extends into the practices of cultural do-it-yourself and recycling, into the invention of the everyday and the development of time lived, which are not objects less deserving of attention and examination than Messianistic utopias and the formal "novelties" that typified modernity yesterday. There is nothing more absurd either than the assertion that contemporary art does not involve any political project, or than the claim that its subversive aspects are not based on any theoretical terrain. Its plan, which has just as much to do with working conditions and the conditions in which cultural objects are produced, as with the changing forms of social life, may nevertheless seem dull to minds formed in the mould of cultural Darwinism. Here, then, is the time of the "dolce utopia," to use Maurizio Cattelan's phrase...

### **Artwork as social interstice**

**The possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions) and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. To sketch a sociology of this, this evolution stems essentially from the**

birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena. The general growth of towns and cities, which took off at the end of the Second World War, gave rise not only to an extraordinary upsurge of social exchanges, but also to much greater individual mobility (through the development of networks and roads, and telecommunications, and the gradual freeing-up of isolated places, going with the opening-up of attitudes). Because of the crampedness of dwelling spaces in this urban world, there was, in tandem, a scaling-down of furniture and objects, now emphasising a greater manoeuvrability. If, for a long period of time, the artwork has managed to come across as a luxury, lordly item in this urban setting (the dimensions of the work, as well as those of the apartment, helping to distinguish between their owner and the crowd), the development of the function of artworks and the way they are shown attest to a growing urbanisation of the artistic experiment. What is collapsing before our very eyes is nothing other than this falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art, associated with the feeling of territorial acquisition. In other words, it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through (the “owner’s tour” is akin to the collector’s). It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion. The city has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience: it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that “state of encounter imposed on people,” to use Althusser’s expression,<sup>3</sup> contrasting with that dense and “trouble-free” jungle which the natural state once was, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a jungle hampering any lasting encounter. Once raised to the power of an absolute rule of civilisation, this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the “encounter” between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning. Let us leave the matter of the historicity of this phenomenon on one side: art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue. One of the virtual properties of the image is its power of linkage (Fr. reliance), to borrow Michel Maffesoli’s term: flags, logos, icons, signs, all produce empathy and sharing, and all generate bonds.<sup>4</sup> Art (practices stemming from painting and sculpture which come across in the form of an exhibition) turns out to be particularly suitable when it comes to expressing this hands-on civilisation, because it tightens the space of relations, unlike TV and literature which refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption, and also unlike theatre and cinema which bring small groups together before specific, unmistakable images. Actually, there is no live comment made about what is seen (the discussion time is put off until after the show). At an exhibition, on the other hand, even when inert forms are involved, there is the possibility of an immediate discussion, in both senses of the term. I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time. Art is the place that produces a specific sociability. It remains to be seen what the status of this is in the set of “states of encounter” proposed by the City. How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?

Before giving concrete examples, it is well worth reconsidering the place of artworks in the overall economic system, be it symbolic or material, which governs contemporary society. Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social interstice. This interstice term was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising,

autarkic types of production, etc. 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 “communication zones” that are imposed upon us. The present-day social context restricts the possibilities of inter-human relations all the more because it creates spaces planned to this end. Automatic public toilets were invented to keep streets clean. The same spirit underpins the development of communication tools, while city streets are swept clean of all manners of relational dross, and neighbourhood relationships fizzle. The general mechanization of social functions gradually reduces the relational space. Just a few years ago, the telephone wake-up call service employed human beings, but now we are woken up by a synthesized voice... The automatic cash machine has become the transit model for the most elementary of social functions, and professional behaviour patterns are modelled on the efficiency of the machines replacing them, these machines carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling. Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.

When Gabriel Orozco puts an orange on the stalls of a deserted Brazilian market (*Crazy Tourist*, 1991), or slings a hammock in the MoMA garden in New York (*Hamoc en la moma*, 1993), he is operating at the hub of “social infra-thinness” (*l’infrafince social*), that minute space of daily gestures determined by the superstructure made up of “big” exchanges, and defined by it. Without any wording, Orozco’s photographs are a documentary record of tiny revolutions in the common urban and semi-urban life (a sleeping bag on the grass, an empty shoebox, etc.). They record this silent, still life nowadays formed by relationships with the other. When Jens Haaning broadcasts funny stories in Turkish through a loudspeaker in a Copenhagen square (*Turkish Jokes*, 1994), he produces in that split second a micro-community, one made up of immigrants brought together by collective laughter which upsets their exile situation, formed in relation to the work and in it. The exhibition is the special place where such momentary groupings may occur, governed as they are by differing principles. And depending on the degree of participation required of the onlooker by the artist, along with the nature of the works and models of sociability proposed and represented, an exhibition will give rise to a specific “arena of exchange.” And this “arena of exchange,” must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the “world” it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it. Within this social interstice, the artist must assume the symbolic models he shows. All representation (though contemporary art models more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom) refers to values that can be transposed into society. As a human activity based on commerce, art is at once the object and the subject of an ethic. And this all the more so because, unlike other activities, its sole function is to be exposed to this commerce. Art is a state of encounter.

### **Relational aesthetics and random materialism**

Relational aesthetics is part of a materialistic tradition. Being “materialistic” does not mean sticking to the triteness of facts, nor does it imply that sort of narrow-mindedness that consists in

reading works in purely economic terms. The philosophical tradition that underpins this relational aesthetics was defined in a noteworthy way by Louis Althusser, in one of his last writings, as a “materialism of encounter,” or random materialism. This particular materialism takes as its point of departure the world contingency, which has no pre existing origin or sense, nor Reason, which might allot it a purpose. So the essence of humankind is purely trans-individual, made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical (Marx: the human essence is the set of social relations). There is no such thing as any possible “end of history” or “end of art,” because the game is being forever re-enacted, in relation to its function, in other words, in relation to the players and the system which they construct and criticise. Hubert Damisch saw in the “end of art” theories the outcome of an irksome muddle between the “end of the Game” and the “end of play.” A new game is announced as soon as the social setting radically changes, without the meaning of the game itself being challenged.<sup>5</sup> This inter human game which forms our object (Duchamp: “Art is a game between all people of all periods.”) nevertheless goes beyond the context of what is railed “art” by commodity. So the “constructed situations” advocated by the Situationist International belong in their own right to this “game,” in spite of Guy Debord who, in the final analysis, denied them any artistic character. For in them, quite to the contrary, he saw “art being exceeded” by a revolution in day-to-day life. Relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art, this would imply the statement of an origin and a destination, but a theory of form.

What do we mean by form? A coherent unit, a structure (independent entity of inner dependencies) which shows the typical features of a world. The artwork does not have an exclusive hold on it, it is merely a subset in the overall series of existing forms. In the materialistic philosophical tradition ushered in by Epicures and Lucretius, atoms fall in parallel formations into the void, following a slightly diagonal course. If one of these atoms swerves off course, it “causes an encounter with the next atom and from encounter to encounter a pile-up, and the birth of the world...” This is how forms come into being, from the “deviation” and random encounter between two hitherto parallel elements. In order to create a world, this encounter must be a lasting one: the elements forming it must be joined together in a form, in other words, there must have been “a setting of elements on one another (the way ice ‘sets’).” “Form can be defined as a lasting encounter.” Lasting encounters, lines and colours inscribed on the surface of a Delacroix painting, the scrap objects that litter Schwitters’ “Merz pictures,” Chris Burden’s performances: over and above the quality of the page layout or the spatial layout, they turn out to be lasting from the moment when their components form a whole whose sense “holds good” at the moment of their birth, stirring up new “possibilities of life.” All works, down to the most critical and challenging of projects, passes through this viable world state, because they get elements held apart to meet: for example, death and tile media in Andy Warhol. Deleuze and Guattari were not saying anything different when they defined the work of art as a “block of affects and percepts.” Art keeps together moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences, be it Cézanne’s apples or Buren’s striped structures. The composition of this bonding agent, whereby encountering atoms manage to form a word, is, needless to say, dependent on the historical context. What today’s informed public understands by “keeping together” is not the same thing that this public imagined back in the 19th century. Today, the “glue” is less obvious, as our visual experience has become more complex, enriched by a century of photographic images, then cinematography (introduction of the sequence shot as a new dynamic unity), enabling us to recognise as a “world” a collection of disparate element

(installation, for instance) that no unifying matter, no bronze, links. Other technologies may allow the human spirit to recognise other types of “world-forms” still unknown: for example, computer science put forward the notion of program, that inflect the approach of some artist’s way of working. An artist’s artwork thus acquires the status of an ensemble of units to be re-activated by the beholder-manipulator. I want to insist on the instability and the diversity of the concept of “form,” notion whose outspread can be witnessed in injunction by the founder of sociology, Emile Durckheim, considering the “social fact” as a “thing”... As the artistic “thing” sometime offers itself as a “fact” or an ensemble of facts that happens in the time or space, and whose unity (making it a form, a world) can not be questioned. The setting is widening; after the isolated object, it now can embrace the whole scene: the form of Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham’s work can not be reduced to the “things” those two artist “produce”; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures... The contemporary artwork’s form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line.

### **Form and others’ gaze**

If, as Serge Daney writes, “all form is a face looking at us,” what does a form become when it is plunged into the dimension of dialogue? What is a form that is essentially relational? It seems worth while to discuss this question by taking Daney’s formula as a point of reference, precisely because of its ambivalence: as forms are looking at us, how are we to look at them?

Form is most often defined as an outline contrasting with a content. But modernist aesthetics talks about “formal beauty” by referring to a sort of (con)fusion between style and content, and an inventive compatibility of the former with the latter. We judge a work through its plastic or visual form. The most common criticism to do with new artistic practices consists, moreover, in denying them any “formal effectiveness,” or in singling out their shortcomings in the “formal resolution.” In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of “formations” rather than “forms.” Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise. There are no forms in nature, in the wild state, as it is our gaze that creates these, by cutting them out in the depth of the visible. Forms are developed, one from another. What was yesterday regarded as formless or “informal” is no longer these things today. When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it.

In the novels of polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, we see how each individual generates his own form through his behaviour, his way of coming across, and the way he addresses others. This form comes about in the borderline area where the individual struggles with the Other, so as to subject him to what he deems to be his “being.” So, for Gombrowicz, our “form” is merely a relational property, linking us with those who reify us by the way they see us, to borrow a Sartrian terminology. When the individual thinks he is casting an objective eye upon himself, he is, in the final analysis, contemplating nothing other than the result of perpetual transactions with the subjectivity of others.

The artistic form, for some, side-steps this inevitability, for it is publicised by a work. Our persuasion, conversely, is that form only assumes its texture (and only acquires a real existence)

when it introduces human interactions. The form of an artwork issues from a negotiation with the intelligible which is bequeathed to us. Through it, the artist embarks upon a dialogue. The artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum. Here we are at the opposite end of this authoritarian version of art which we discover in the essays of Thierry de Duves, for whom any work is nothing other than a “sum of judgements,” both historical and aesthetic, stated by the artist in the act of its production. To paint is to become part of history through plastic and visual choices. We are in the presence of a prosecutor’s aesthetics, here, for which the artist confronts the history of art in the autarky of his own persuasions. It is an aesthetics that reduces artistic practice to the level of a pettifogging historical criticism. Practical “judgement,” thus aimed, is peremptory and final in each instance, hence the negation of dialogue, which, alone, grants form a productive status: the status of an “encounter.” As part of a “relationist” theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its “environment,” its “field” (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice. As Daney suggested, form becomes “face” through the effect of this invention of relations. This formula, needless to add, calls to mind the one acting as the pedestal for Emmanuel Lévinas’ thinking, for whom the face represents the sign of the ethical taboo. The face, Lévinas asserts, is “what orders me to serve another,” “what forbids me to kill.”<sup>7</sup> Any “inter-subjective relation” proceeds by way of the form of the face, which symbolises the responsibility we have towards others: “the bond with others is only made as responsibility,” he writes, but don’t ethics have a horizon other than this humanism which reduces inter-subjectivity to a kind of inter servility? Is the image, which, for Daney, is a metaphor of the face, only therefore suitable for producing taboos and proscriptions, through the burden of “responsibility”? When Daney explains that “all form is a face looking at us,” he does not merely mean that we are responsible for this. To be persuaded of as much, suffice it to revert to the profound significance of the image for Daney. For him, the image is not “immoral” when it puts us “in the place where we were not,”<sup>8</sup> when it “takes the place of another.” What is involved here, for Daney, is not solely a reference to the aesthetics of Bazin and Rossellini, claiming the “ontological realism” of the cinematographic art, which even if it does lie at the origin of Daney’s thought, does not sum it up. He maintains that form, in an image, is nothing other than the representation of desire. Producing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange, the way you return a service in a game of tennis. If we nudge Daney’s reasoning a bit further, form is the representative of desire in the image. It is the horizon based on which the image may have a meaning, by pointing to a desired world, which the beholder thus becomes capable of discussing, and based on which his own desire can rebound. This exchange can be summed up by a binomial: someone shows something to someone who returns it as he sees fit. The work tries to catch my gaze, the way the new-born child “asks for” its mother’s gaze. In *La Vie commune*, Tzvetan Todorov has shown how the essence of sociability is the need for acknowledgement, much more than competition and violence.<sup>9</sup> When an artist shows us something, he uses a transitive ethic which places his work between the “look-at-me” and the “look-at-that.” Daney’s most recent writings lament the end of this “Show/See” pairing, which represented the essence of a democracy of the image in favour of another pairing, this one TV-related and authoritarian, “Promote/receive,” marking the advent of the “Visual.” In Daney’s thinking, “all form is a face looking at me,” because it is summoning me to dialogue with it. Form is a dynamic that is included both, or turn by turn, in time and

space. Form can only come about from a meeting between two levels of reality. For homogeneity does not produce images: it produces the visual, otherwise put, “looped information.”



Gabriel Orozco, *Tourista Maluco (Crazy Tourist)*, 1991, C-print, series of five prints, courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

**Space-time exchange factors Artworks and exchanges** Because art is made of the same material as the social exchanges, it has a special place in the collective production process. A work of art has a quality that sets it apart from other things produced by human activities. This quality is its (relative) social transparency, if a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sights beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion, and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called “the coefficient of art,” which is a temporal process, being played out here and now. This negotiation is undertaken in a spirit of “transparency” which hallmarks it as a product of human labour. The work of art actually shows (or suggests) not only its manufacturing and production process, its position within the set of exchanges, and the place, or function, it allocates to the beholder, but also the creative behaviour of the artist (otherwise put, the sequence of postures and gestures which make up his/her work, and which each individual work passes on like a sample or marker). So every canvas produced by Jackson Pollock so closely links the flow of paint to an artist’s behaviour, that the latter seems to be the image of the former, like its “necessary product,” as Hubert Damisch has written. At the beginning of art we find the behaviour adopted by the artist, that set of moods and acts whereby the work acquires its relevance in the present. The “transparency” of the artwork comes about from the fact that the gestures forming and informing it are freely chosen or invented, and are part of its subject. For example, over and above the popular icon represented by the image of Marilyn Monroe, the sense of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn stems from the industrial production

process adopted by the artist, governed by an altogether mechanical indifference to the subjects selected by him. **[Although Bourriaud's "transparency," which he identifies as the distinguishing characteristic of art, highlights important aspects of the role of art in society and commerce, I would nonetheless replace the term with "non-literality."** For starters, the claim that all art shows or at least suggests is manufacturing and production processes seems patently incorrect, given that a chief fascination among consumers of many works of art is wonder at how on in the world could the artist possibly have made that?!? I would suggest rather that this interest in the methods of manufacture and production masks an anxiety about the fact that, as Bourriaud himself suggests, the artwork has no practical purpose or obvious meaning – in fact, generally, the better the work is, the more one has to actually *think* about it in order to get the good out of it; ergo, questions about methods of manufacture, the artist's background, the historical/theoretical context, indeed everything BUT the work itself, offer welcome distraction.] This “transparency” of artistic work contrasts, need it be said, with the sacred, and with those ideologies which seek in art the means of giving the religious a new look. This relative transparency, which is an a priori form of artistic exchange, seems intolerable to the bigot. We know that, once introduced into the exchange circuit, any kind of production takes on a social form which no longer has anything to do with its original usefulness. It acquires an exchange value that partly covers and shrouds its primary “nature.” The fact is that a work of art has no a priori useful function — not that it is socially useless, but because it is available and flexible, and has an “infinite tendency.” In other words, it is devoted, right away, to the world of exchange and communication, the world of “commerce,” in both meanings of the term. What all goods have in common is the fact that they have a value, that is, a common substance that permits their exchange. This substance, according to Marx, is the “amount of abstract labour” used to produce this item. It is represented by a sum of money, which is the “abstract general equivalent” of all goods between them. It has been said of art, and Marx was the first, that it represents the “absolute merchandise,” because it is the actual image of the value. But what exactly are we talking about? About the art object, not about artistic practice, about the work as it is assumed by the general economy, and not its own economy. Art represents a barter activity that cannot be regulated by any currency, or any “common substance.” It is the division of meaning in the wild state – an exchange whose form is defined by that of the object itself, before being so defined by definitions foreign to it. The artist's practice, and his behaviour as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.

**The subject of the artwork** Every artist whose work stems from relational aesthetics has a world of forms, a set of problems and a trajectory which are all his own. They are not connected together by any style, theme or iconography. What they do share together is much more decisive, to wit, the fact of operating within one and the same practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations. Their works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her, and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together. So they are all working within what we might call the relational sphere, which is to today's art what mass production was to Pop Art and Minimal Art. They all root their artistic praxis within a proximity which relativizes the place of visibility in the exhibition protocol, without belittling it. The artwork of the 1990s turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor. It is precisely the attitude of this generation toward communications that makes it

possible to define it in relation to previous generations. Most artists emerging in the 1980s, from Richard Prince to Jeff Koons by way of Jenny Holzer, developed the visual aspect of the media, while their successors show a preference for contact and tactility. They prefer immediacy in their visual writing. This phenomenon has a sociological explanation, given that the decade that has just gone by, marked as it was by the recession, turned out to be not very propitious to spectacular and showy undertakings. There are also purely aesthetic reasons for this: the “back to” pendulum came to a halt in the 1980s on movements from the 1960s, and mainly Pop Art, whose visual effectiveness underpins most of the forms proposed by simulationism. For better or for worse, our era is identified, right clown to its crisis “ambience,” with the “poor” and experimental art of the 1970s. This albeit superficial voguish effect made it possible to re-view the works of artists like Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, while the success of Mike Kelley recently encouraged a rereading of Californian “Junk Art,” from Paul Thek to Tetsumi Kudo. Fashion also creates aesthetic microclimates, the effects of which have repercussions even on our reading of recent history. Otherwise put, the sieve organises the mesh of its net in different ways, and “lets through” other types of works — which, in return, influence the present. This said, we find ourselves, with relational artists, in the presence of a group of people who, for the first time since the appearance of Conceptual Art in the mid sixties, in no way draw sustenance from any re-interpretation of this or that past aesthetic movement. Relational art is not the revival of any movement, nor is it the comeback of any style. It arises from an observation of the present and from a line of thinking about the fate of artistic activity. Its basic claim — the sphere of human relations as artwork venue — has no prior example in art history, even if it appears, after the fact, as the obvious backdrop of all aesthetic praxis, and as a modernist theme to cap all modernist themes. Suffice it merely to re read the lecture given by Marcel Duchamp in 1954, titled “The Creative Process,” to become quite sure that interactivity is anything but a new idea... Novelty is elsewhere. It resides in the fact that this generation of artists considers inter-subjectivity and interaction neither as fashionable theoretical gadgets, nor as additives (alibis) of a traditional artistic practice. It takes them as a point of departure and as an outcome, in brief, as the main informers of their activity. The space where their works are displayed is altogether the space of interaction, the space of openness that ushers in all dialogue (Georges Bataille would have written: “rift” [“déchirure”]). What they produce are relational space-time elements, inter-human experiences trying to rid themselves of the straitjacket of the ideology of mass communications, in a way, of the places where alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality are worked out. [I.e., tv-watching, Facebook, etc.?] It is nevertheless quite clear that the age of the New Man, future-oriented manifestos, and calls for a better world all ready to be walked into and lived in is well and truly over. These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments. [E.g., Brooklyn ca. 2000.] The artwork is presented as a social interstice within which these experiments and these new “life possibilities” appear to be possible. It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows. That is all, but it is quite something. And in any event it represents a much-awaited alternative to the depressive, authoritarian and reactionary thinking which, in France at least, passes for art theory in the form of “common sense” rediscovered. Modernity, however, is not dead, if we acknowledge as modern a soft spot for aesthetic experience and adventurous thinking, as contrasted with the cautious forms of conventionality being defended by our freelance philosophers, the neo-traditionalists (“Beauty” according to the priceless Dave Hickey) and those backward-looking militant such as Jean Clair.

Whatever these fundamentalists clinging to yesterday's good taste may say and think, present-day art is roundly taking on and taking up the legacy of the 20th century avant-gardes, while at the same time challenging their dogmatism and their teleological doctrines. Rest assured that much pondering went into this last sentence: it is simply time to write it down. For modernism was steeped in an "imaginary of contrasts," to borrow Gilbert Durand's term, which proceeded by way of separations and contrasts, readily disqualifying the past in favour of the future. It was based on conflict, whereas the imaginary of our day and age is concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences. These days we are no longer trying to advance by means of conflictual clashes, by way of the invention of new assemblages, possible relations between distinct units, and alliances struck up between different partners. Aesthetic contracts, like social contracts, are abided by for what they are. Nobody nowadays has ideas about ushering in the golden age on Earth, and we are readily prepared just to create various forms of modus vivendi permitting fairer social relations, more compact ways of living, and many different combinations of fertile existence. Art, likewise, is no longer seeking to represent utopias: rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces.

**Space-time factors in 1990s' art** These "relational" procedures (invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments, etc.) are merely a repertory of common forms, vehicles through which particular lines of thought and personal relationships with the world are developed. The subsequent form that each artist gives to this relational production is not unalterable, either. These artists perceive their work from a threefold viewpoint, at once aesthetic (how is it to be "translated" in material terms?), historical (how is to be incorporated in a set of artistic references?) and social (how is to find a coherent position with regard to the current state of production and social relations?). These activities evidently acquire their formal and theoretical marks in Conceptual Art, in Fluxus and in Minimal Art, but they simply use these like a vocabulary, a lexical basis. Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the New Realists all relied on tile readymade to develop both their rhetoric about the object, and their sociological discourse. When relational art makes reference to conceptual and Fluxus-inspired situations and methods, or to Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smith-son and Dan Graham, it is to convey lines of thought which have nothing to do with their own thinking. The real question is more likely this: what are the right exhibition methods in relation to the cultural context and in relation to the history of art as it is being currently updated? Video, for example, is nowadays becoming a predominant medium. But if Peter Land, Gillian Wearing and Henry Bond, to name just three artists, have a preference for video recording, they are still not "video artists." This medium merely turns out to be the one best suited to the formalisation of certain activities and projects. Other artists thus produce a systematic documentation about their work, thereby drawing the lessons of Conceptual Art, but on radically different aesthetic bases. Relational art, which is well removed from the administrative rationality that underpins it (the form of the notarised contract, ubiquitous in the sixties' art), tends to draw inspiration more from the flexible processes governing ordinary life. We can use the term communications, but here, too, today's artists are placed at the other extreme, compared with how artists made use of the media in the previous decade. Where these artists tackled the visual form of mass communications and the icons of pop culture. Liam Gillick, Miltos Manetas and Jorge Pardo work on scaled-down models of communicational situations. This can be interpreted as a change in the collective sensibility. Henceforth the group is pitted against the mass, neighbourliness against propaganda, low tech against high tech, and the tactile against the visual. And above all,

the everyday now turns out to be a much more fertile terrain than “pop culture” a form that only exists in contrast to “high culture,” through it and for it. To head off tiny polemic about a so-called return to “conceptual” art, let us bear in mind that these works in no way celebrate immateriality. None of these artists has a preference for “performances” or concept, words that no longer mean a whole lot here. In a word, the work process no longer has any supremacy over ways of rendering this work material (unlike Process Art and Conceptual Art, which, for their part, tended to fetishize the mental process to the detriment of the object). In the worlds constructed by these artists, on the contrary, objects are an intrinsic part of the language, with both regarded as vehicles of relations to the other. In a way, an object is every bit as immaterial as a phone call. And a work that consists in a dinner around a soup is every bit as material as a statue. This arbitrary, division between the gesture and the forms it produces is here called into question, insofar as it is the very image of contemporary alienation: the cannily maintained illusion, even in art institutions, that objects excuse methods and that the end of art justifies the pettiness of the intellectual and ethical means. Objects and institutions, and the use of time and works, are at once the outcome of human relations — for they render social work concrete - and producers of relations — for, conversely, they organise types of sociability and regulate inter-human encounters. Today’s art thus prompts us to envisage the relations between space and time in a different way. Essentially, moreover, it derives its main originality from the way this issue is handled. What, actually, is concretely produced by artists such as Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Vanessa Beecroft? What, in the final analysis, is the object of their work? To introduce a few comparative factors, we should have to embark upon a history of the use value of art. When a collector purchased a work by Jackson Pollock or Yves Klein, he was buying, over and above its aesthetic interest, a milestone in a history on the move. He became the purchaser of a historical situation. Yesterday, when you bought a Jeff Koons, what was being brought to the fore was the hyper-reality of artistic value. What has one bought when one owns a work by Tiravanija or Douglas Gordon, other than a relationship with the world rendered concrete by an object, which, per se, defines the relations one has towards this relationship: the relationship to a relationship?

#### Notes:

1. Jean-François Lyotard: “The post modern explained to children,” London, Turnaround, 1992
  2. Michel de Certeau: *Manieres de faire*, Editions Idées-Gallimard.
  3. Louis Althusser: *Ecrits philo-sophiques et politiques*, Editions Stock-IMEC, 1995, p. 557.
  4. Michel Maffesoli: *La contemplation du monde*, Editions Grasset, 1993.
  5. Hubert Damisch: *Fenetre jaune cadmium*, Editions du Seuil.
  6. Thierry de Duve: *Essais datés*. Editions de La Différence, 1987.
  7. Emmanuel Lévinas: *Ethique et infini*, Poche-Biblio, p. 93.
  8. Serge Daney: *Persévérance*, Editions P.O.L., 1992, p. 38.
  9. Tzvetan Todorov: *La Vie commune*, Editions du Seuil, 1994.
  10. Hubert Damisch, *Fenetre jaune cadmium*, Editions du Seuil, p. 76.
- Chapters 1 and 3 from the book *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourriaud, published in English by Press du Réel in 2002. Reprinted here with permission.

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## **BOURRIAUD - RELATIONAL AESTHETICS - GLOSSARY (INTEGRAL)**

From "Relational Aesthetics" by NB, published by "les Presses du Reel", Dijon, France  
2002 english version 1998 french version.

### **Academism:**

1. An attitude that involves clinging to the defunct signs and forms of one's day and rendering these aesthetic.
2. synonym: pompous (pompier)  
-And why wouldn't he do something pompous, if it pays off` (Samuel Beckett)

### **Aesthetics**

An idea that sets humankind apart from other animal species. In the end of the day, burying the dead, laughter, and suicide are just the corollaries of a deep-seated hunch, that life is an aesthetic, ritualised, shaped form.

### **Art.**

1. General term describing a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as art history. This narrative draws up the critical genealogy and discusses the issues raised by these objects, by way of three sub-sets: painting, sculpture, architecture.
2. Nowadays, the word 'art' seems to be no more than a semantic leftover of this narrative, whose more accurate definition would read as follows: Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.

### **Art (The end of )**

'The end of art' only exists in an idealistic view of history. We can nevertheless, and not without irony, borrow Hegel's formula whereby 'art, for us, is a thing of the past' and turn it into a figure

of style: let us remain open to what is happening in the present, which invariably exceeds, a priori, our capacities of understanding.

### **Artist**

When Benjamin Buchloh referred to the conceptual and minimal generation of the 1960's, he defined the artist as a 'scholar-philosopher-craftsman' who hands society 'the objective results of his labour'. For Buchloh, this figure was heir to that of the artist as 'mediumic and transcendental subject' represented by Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana and Joseph Beuys. Recent developments in art merely modify Buchloh's hunch. Today's artist appears as an operator of signs, modelling production structures so as to provide significant doubles. An entrepreneur/politician/director. The most common denominator shared by all artists is that they show something. The act of showing suffices to define the artist, be it a representation or a designation.

### **Behaviour**

1. Beside those two established genres, the history of things and the history of forms, we still need to come up with a history of artistic behaviours. It would be naive to think that the history of art represents a whole capable of perennially replacing these three sub-groups. An artist's microbiography would point up the things he has achieved within his oeuvre.

2. Artist, producer of time.

All totalitarian ideologies show a distinctive wish to control the time in which they exist. They replace the versatility of time invented by the individual by the fantasy of a central place where it might be possible to acquire the overall meaning of society. Totalitarianism systematically tries to set up a form of temporal motionlessness, and rendering the time in which it exists uniform and collective, a fantasy of eternity aimed first and foremost at standardising and monitoring patterns of behaviours. Foucault thus rightly stressed the fact that the art of living classed with 'all forms of fascism, be they already there or lurking'

### **Co-existence criterion**

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. May I simply remind you, for the record, that the forms produced by the art of totalitarian regimes are peremptory and closed in on themselves (particularly through their stress on symmetry).

Otherwise put, they do not give the viewer a chance to complement them.

(see: Relational (aesthetics)).

### **Context**

In situ art is a form of artistic activity that encompasses the space in which it is on view. This consideration by the artist of the exhibition venue consisted, yesterday, in exploring its spatial and architectural configuration. A second possibility, prevalent in the art of the 1990s consists in an institutional structure, the socio-economic features encompassing it, and the people involved. This latter method calls for a great deal of subtlety : although such contextual studies have the merit of reminding us that the artistic doing does not drop out of the sky into a place unblemished by any ideology, it is nevertheless important to fit this investigation into a prospect that goes beyond the primary stage of sociology, It is not enough to extract, mechanically, the

social characteristics of the place where you exhibit (the art centre, the city, the region, the country...) to "reveal" whatever it may be. For some artists who complicated thinking represents an architecture of meanings, no more nor less (Dan Asher, Daniel Buren, Jef Geys, Mark Dion) how many conceptual hacks are there who laboriously 'associate', for their show in Montelimar, nougat production and unemployment figures? The mistake lies in thinking that the sense of an aesthetic fact lies solely in the context.

## **2. Art after criticism**

Once art 'overtook' philosophy (Joseph Kosuth), it nowadays goes beyond critical philosophy, where conceptual art has helped to spread the viewpoint. Doubt can be cast over the stance of the 'critical' artist, when this position consists in judging the world as if he were excluded from it by divine grace, and played no part in it. This idealistic attitude can be contrasted with Lacanian intuition that the unconscious is its own analyst. And Marx's idea that explains that real criticism is the criticism of reality that exists through criticism itself. For there is no mental place where the artist might exclude himself from the world he represents.

### **Critical materialism**

The world is made up of random encounters (Lucretius, Hobbes, Marx, Althusser). Art, too, is made of chaotic, chance meetings of signs and forms. Nowadays, it even creates spaces within which the encounter can occur. Present-day art does not present the outcome of a labour, it is the labour itself, or the labour-to-be.

### **Factitiousness**

Art is not the world of suspended will (Schopenhauer), or of the disappearance of contingency (Sartre), but a space emptied of the factitious. It in no way clashes with authenticity (an absurd value where art is concerned) but replaces coherences, even phoney ones, with the illusory world of 'truth'. It is the bad lie that betrays the hack, who at best touching sincerity inevitably ends up as a forked tongue.

### **Form**

Structural unity imitating a world. Artistic practice involves creating a form capable of "lasting", bringing heterogeneous units together on a coherent level, in order to create a relationship to the world.

### **Gesture**

Movement of the body revealing a psychological state or designed to express an idea. Gesturality means the set of requisite operations introduced by the production of artworks, from their manufacture to the production of peripheral signs (actions, event, anecdotes)

### **Image**

Making a work involves the invention of a process of presentation. In this kind of process, the image is an act.

### **Inhabiting**

Having imagined architecture and art of the future, the artist is now proposing solutions for inhabiting them. The contemporary form of modernity is ecological, haunted by the occupancy of forms and the use of images.

### **Modern**

The ideals of modernity have not vanished, they have been adapted. So "the total work of art" comes about today in its spectacular version, emptied of its teleological content. Our civilization makes up for the hyperspecialization of social functions by the progressive unity of leisure activities. It is thus possible to predict, without too much risk attaching thereto, that the aesthetic experience of the average late 20th century individual might roughly resemble what early 20th century avant-gardes imagined. Between the interactive video disk, the CD-Rom, ever more multi-media-oriented games consoles, and the extreme sophistication of mass recreational venues, discotheques and theme parks, we are heading towards the condensation of leisure in unifying forms. Towards a compact art. Once a CD-Rom and Cd-I drives are available. which have enough autonomy, books, exhibitions and films will be in competition with a form of expression that is at once more comprehensive and more thought-restricting, circulating writing, imagery and sound in new forms.

### **Operational realism**

Presentation of the functional sphere in an aesthetic arrangement. The work proposes a functional model and not a maquette. In other words, the concept of dimension does not come into it, just as in the digital image whose proportions may vary depending on the size of the screen, which unlike the frame, does not enclose works within a predetermined format, but rather renders virtuality material in x dimensions.

### **Ready-made**

Artistic figure contemporary with the invention of film. The artist takes his camera-subjectivity into the real, defining himself as a cameraman: the museum plays the part of the film, he records. For the first time, with Duchamp, art no longer consists in translating the real with the help of signs, but in presenting this same real as it is (Duchamp, the Lumière brothers...

### **Relational Aesthetics**

Aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt. (see co-existence criterion)

### **Relational (art)**

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.

### **Semionaut**

The contemporary artist is a semionaut, he invents trajectories between signs.

### **Society of extras**

The society of the spectacle has been defined by Guy Debord as the historical moment when merchandise achieved 'the total occupation of social life ', capital having reached 'such a degree of accumulation' that it was turned into imagery. Today , we are in the further stage of

spectacular development: the individual has shifted from a passive and purely repetitive status to the minimum activity dictated to him by market forces. So television consumption is shrinking in favour of video games, thus the spectacular hierarchy encourages 'empty monads', i.e. programmeless models and politicians, thus everyone sees themselves summoned to be famous for fifteen minutes, using a TV game, street poll or new item as go-between. This is the reign of the 'Infamous Man', whom Michel Foucault defined as the anonymous and 'ordinary' individual suddenly put in the glare of the media spotlights. Here we are summoned to turn into extras of the spectacle, having been regarded as its consumers. This switch can be historically explained: since the surrender of the Soviet bloc, there are no obstacles on capitalism's path to empire. It has a total hold of the social arena, so it can permit itself to stir individuals to frolic about in the free and open spaces that it has staked out. So, after the consumer society, we can see the dawning of the society of extras where the individual develops as a part-time stand-in for freedom, signer and sealer of the public place.

### Style

The movement of a work, its trajectory 'The style of a thought is its movement' (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari).

### **Trailer**

Having been an event per se (classical painting), then the graphic recording of an event (the work of Jackson Pollock with photographic documents describing a performance or an action), today's work of art often assumes the role of a trailer for a forthcoming event, or an event that is put off forever.