

Transmission: The Rules of Engagement 13

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Non-relational Aesthetics

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## Non-relational Aesthetics

In a leader in *The Guardian* newspaper published in October 2006, Madeleine Bunting, journalist and director of the Demos think tank, described an event in which an Anthony Gormley sculpture was burned on a derelict fairground site in Margate and suggested that:

Culture and art have broken out of elitist circles in the past 10 to 15 years. Museums and galleries are no longer the preserve of the middle class, monuments are no longer just for leafy London squares or town halls; there has been a democratisation of culture. The appetite for the drama, shock, delight, intrigue and sheer bewilderment which the visual arts so abundantly provide is growing apace [...] a new kind of public art of engagement and participation. Gormley's *Waste Man* in Margate was built by volunteers; he issued a call for help in the local newspaper. The walls between the elite who produce art and those who observe it are disappearing, and art has broken out of the reserves offered by institutions such as museums and galleries. This kind of art is not something you choose to go and visit - it goes out to make itself an audience [...] culture and its funding is no longer an add-on but central to any politics committed to the vitality of the public realm and how societies build collective purpose. In key areas such as identity, where emotions are raw and intense, culture of all kinds is a vital arena in which to explore hopes and defuse fears before the latter take violent or political form.<sup>1</sup>



Fig 1: Cover of Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, 1998, by Michael Corris.

Such a conception of art might be seen to be consonant with so-called 'relational art' and 'relational aesthetics', defined by curator Nicholas Bourriaud as, respectively, 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' and an 'aesthetic theory consisting in judging art works on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt'.<sup>2</sup> Bourriaud continues:

After the area of relations between humankind and deity, and then between humankind and the object, artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations... the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability.<sup>3</sup> [Fig 1]

The forms these take include 'meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and

places of conviviality'.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein Grant Kester writes about what he calls 'Littoral Art' based on a 'discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience – a relationship that allows the viewer to "speak back" to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the "work" itself'.<sup>5</sup> For Kester, 'the new locus of judgment' will be found in 'the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself', which he defines 'as a pragmatic form of criticism to the extent that it is concerned with the specific effects produced by these exchanges in a given context. At the same time, it retains a nominal teleological orientation in that it preserves some concept of an ideal discursive process that can act as a benchmark against which to evaluate actual projects'.<sup>6</sup>

Kester proposes a 'discursive aesthetic which conceives of the artist primarily as a collaborator in dialogue rather than an expressive agent', and in which 'the artist's identity is tested and transformed by intersubjective experience, rather than being fortified against it.' He admits that the "artist" occupies a socially constructed position of privileged subjectivity, reinforced by both institutional sponsorship and deeply imbedded cultural connotations', but suggests:

it is the achievement of Littoral practitioners to work to mitigate the effects of these associations as much as possible, and to open up and equalize the process of dialogical exchange. This process is most easily facilitated in those cases in which the artist collaborates with a politically coherent community; that is, with a community or collectivity that has, through its own internal processes, achieved some degree of coherence, and a sense of its own political interests, and is able to enter into a discursive collaboration on more equal footing.<sup>7</sup>

In a critique of relational art in *Artforum*, Claire Bishop, writing about the critical reaction to a work by Turkish collective Oda Projesi, suggests that ‘criticism is dominated by *ethical* judgments on working procedure and intentionality’, and observes that ‘socially engaged art has been largely exempt from art criticism. Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts.’<sup>8</sup> Bishop aligns herself with Jacques Rancière, for whom the aesthetic is:

the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art’s autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. For Rancière the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.<sup>9</sup>

Reading Kester and Bishop’s apparently opposing views of art it is hard not to be reminded of Nietzsche’s observation in *Human All Too Human*:

Art raises its head where religions relax their hold. It takes over many feelings and moods engendered by religion, lays them to its heart, and itself becomes deeper, more full of soul, so that it is capable of transmitting exultation and enthusiasm, which it previously was not able to do. The abundance of religious feelings which have grown into a stream are always breaking forth again and desire to conquer new kingdoms, but the growth of the Enlightenment undermined the dogmas of religion and inspired a fundamental mistrust of them—so that the feelings, thrust by the Enlightenment out of the religious sphere, throw themselves into art...<sup>10</sup> [Fig 2]

For Kester, art is supposed to fulfil religion’s traditional role in binding together community while for Bishop it takes on the messianic duty of promising a ‘better world to come’. Thus, despite their apparent opposition, Kester and Bishop’s views both

remain underwritten by religion. For Kester, art acts almost as a replacement for the binding together of the community through the rituals of religion such as the Eucharist, enabling what John Bossy describes as the ‘Social Miracle’, an expression of the vision of social beatitude or ‘state of charity, meaning social integration’, which ‘was the principle end of Christianity’ from the time of Dante to that of Luther. Rituals such as the Eucharist, along with institutions such as guilds, and new forms of social protocol involving the formalising of friendly greeting were all part of a deliberate attempt to enable the renunciation of violence.<sup>11</sup> In his essay ‘The Inoperative Community’, Jean-Luc Nancy remarks:

the true consciousness of the loss of community is Christian: the community desired or pined for by Rousseau, Schlegel, Hegel, Bakhtin, Marx, Wagner, or Mallarmé is understood as communion, and communion takes place, in its principle as in its ends, at the heart of the mystical body of Christ.<sup>12</sup> [Fig 3]



Fig 2: Friedrich Nietzsche by Michael Corris, after Edvard Munch, 1906.



Fig 3: *The Last Supper* by Charlie Gere, after Albrecht Dürer, 1523.

In an on-line paper from 2007, 'Collaborative Practices in Environmental Art', Kester describes the increasing tendency towards collaborations and suggests that 'these interactions begin to erode the romantic image of the artist as solitary genius, positing instead a guild-like community of co-creators.'<sup>13</sup> This connects Kester not just to the religious conception of art of the middle ages, but also to the most religious of nineteenth-century writers on art, John Ruskin, who of course founded his own arts and crafts guild, the Guild of St George.

For Bourriaud, relational aesthetics is part of a more general collective culture, made possible by new technologies:

Spectator 'participation', theorised by Fluxus happenings and performances, has become a constant feature of artistic practice. As for the space of reflection opened up by Marcel Duchamp's 'art coefficient', attempting to create precise boundaries for the receiver's

field of activity in the artwork, this nowadays being resolved in a culture of interactivity which posits the transitivity of the cultural object as a *fait accompli*. As such, these factors merely ratify a development that goes way beyond the mere realm of art. The share of interactivity grows in volume within the set of communication vehicles. On the other hand, the emergence of new technologies, like the Internet and new multimedia systems, points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object.<sup>14</sup>

A good example of such claims can be found on the website of the P2P Foundation, founded by MC Bauwens with the aim of 'researching, documenting and promoting peer to peer practices'. It 'proposes to be a meeting place for those who can broadly agree with the following propositions', which include the claim 'that technology reflects a change of consciousness towards participation, and in turn strengthens it'. Bauwens suggests that 'peer to peer relations [...] is a new form of political organizing and subjectivity, and an alternative for the political/economic order, which [...] points the way to a variety of dialogical and self-organizing formats' and 'ushers in an era of 'nonrepresentational democracy', where an increasing number of people are able to manage their social and productive life through the use of a variety of autonomous and interdependent networks and peer circles'. Bauwens also invokes the idea of an 'information commons' and the need for 'fundamental changes in the intellectual property regime', which he finds 'reflected in new forms such as the free software movement', whose principles provide for 'models that could be used in other areas of social and productive life'. By such means Bauwens wishes to reconnect 'with the older traditions and attempts for a more cooperative social order, but this time obviates the need for authoritarianism and centralisation'. He suggests that peer to peer technology has:

'the potential of showing that the new egalitarian digital culture [...] is connected to the older traditions of cooperation of the workers and peasants, and to the search for an engaged and meaningful life as expressed in one's work, which becomes an expression of individual and collective creativity, rather than as a salaried means of survival'<sup>15</sup>

Several decades ago in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* Marshall McLuhan anticipated relational aesthetics and littoral art in his description of 'the "simultaneous field" of electronic information structures, which today reconstitutes the conditions and need for dialogue and participation, rather than specialism and private initiative in all levels of social experience'.<sup>16</sup> He also famously observed in *Understanding Media*: 'As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed at bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree'.<sup>17</sup>

McLuhan's idea of a 'global village' anticipates Walter Ong's later notion of 'secondary orality', which compared the communications 'sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices' to the oral communications of preliterate societies.<sup>18</sup> In 'Signature Event Context', in one of the few statements, at least in his early work, made referring directly to contemporary ideas about media transformation, Jacques Derrida strongly criticised McLuhan's 'global village' and suggested:

We are not witnessing an end of writing which, to follow McLuhan's ideological representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations; but indeed a more and more powerful historical unfolding of a general writing of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would only be an effect, to be analyzed as such. It is this questioned effect that I have elsewhere called *logocentrism*.<sup>19</sup>

For Derrida, writing, and thus by extension all discourse, involves alterity, difference, and deferral. In his book on later Derrida, Herman Rapaport describes the 'division or splitting [that] constitutes our passion to speak, to be in language, even as it marks our failure to communicate transparently within those genres that would map out our thoughts and experiences for us in advance'.<sup>20</sup> He suggests that the 'community of readers is itself a negative community or community without community [...] a relation without relation, a participation without participation'.<sup>21</sup> In a recent paper by J Hillis Miller, published after Derrida's death, Derrida is described as 'enlaid', meaning something like Robinson Crusoe's experience of being alone on an island. Miller quotes from an as-yet unpublished seminar by Derrida in which he describes Crusoe's experience of solitude and 'firmly asserts that each man or woman is marooned on his or her own island, enclosed in a singular world, with no isthmus, bridge, or other means of communication to the sealed worlds of others or from their worlds to mine'.<sup>22</sup> Derrida declares that:

Neither animals of different species, nor men of different cultures, nor any individual, animal or human, inhabits the same world as another, however close and similar these living individuals may be (humans or animals), and the difference from one world to the other will remain forever uncrossable, the community of the world being always constructed, simulated by a group of stabilizing positings, more or less stable, therefore also never natural, language in the broad sense, codes of traces being destined, with all the living, to construct a unity of the world always deconstructible and nowhere and never given in nature. Between my world, the 'my world'; what I call 'my world', and there is no other for me, every other world making up part of it, between my world and every other world, there is initially the space and the time of an infinite difference, of an interruption incommensurable with all the attempts at passage, of bridge, of isthmus, of communication, of translation, of trope, and of transfer which the desire for a world and the sickness of the world, the being

in sickness of the world will attempt to pose, to impose, to propose, to stabilize. There is no world, there are only islands.<sup>23</sup>

Central to this enisled incommensurability between every other is the singularity of our experience of death. In his book *The Gift of Death* Derrida declares that ‘everyone must assume his own death, that is to say the one thing in the world that no one else can either give or take [...] Thus dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised or transmitted’.<sup>24</sup> Death is a ‘gift’ because it alone gives us our unsubstitutable identity. He continues: ‘Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, “given”, one can say, by death’. It is only as a mortal, through the gift of death that one is ‘called to responsibility’.<sup>25</sup> Death is:

The gift made to me by God as he holds me in his gaze and in his hand while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dyssymmetrical gift of the *mysterium tremendum* only allow me to respond and only rouses me to the responsibility it gives me by making a gift of death [...] giving me a secret of death, a new experience of death.<sup>26</sup>

*Mysterium Tremendum* – ‘overwhelming mystery’ – is a term originally coined by Rudolf Otto to describe our experience of the wholly other. Derrida describes it as a ‘frightful mystery, a secret to make you tremble’. The word ‘tremendous’ is a gerundive derived from *tremo*, ‘that which makes one tremble, something frightening, distressing, terrifying’.<sup>27</sup> Trembling, unlike quivering for example, takes place after an event that has already happened, such as an earthquake, with its *tremors*, even if it continues to threaten us:

We tremble in that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past (a shock has been felt, a traumatism has already affected us) to

a future that cannot be anticipated; anticipated but unpredictable; apprehended, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely as unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached as unapproachable [...] We tremble because we don’t know which direction the shock came from [...] and we tremble from not knowing, in the form of a double secret, whether it is going to continue, start again, insist, be repeated.<sup>28</sup>

He suggests that ‘One doesn’t know why one trembles’;<sup>29</sup> much as one does not know why one weeps. The *mysterium tremendum*, that which makes us tremble or weep, is:

the gift of infinite love, the dissymmetry that exists between the divine regard that sees me, and myself, who doesn’t see what is looking at me; it is the gift and endurance of death that exists in the irreplaceable, the disproportion between the infinite gift and my finitude.<sup>30</sup>

Much as the disciples work towards their salvation in fear and trembling, because their salvation lies in God, ‘whom we don’t see and whose will we cannot know’, ‘without knowing from whence the thing comes and what awaits us, we are given over to absolute solitude’.<sup>31</sup> This is because ‘God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate and secret at the moment he has to be obeyed’. He does not have to give reasons, or share motivations or anything with us. If he did he would not be God and ‘we would not be dealing with God as wholly other’.<sup>32</sup>

In ‘My Chances’, Derrida invokes the Greek ‘atomist’ philosophers Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius who proposed that the universe is composed of atoms falling eternally in an infinite void. Everything that happens and everything that exists is as a result of the chance collision of such atoms, ‘*clinamen*’. Thus chance or luck are often described in or referred to through terms related to falling:

Now I would say that the unforeseeable is precisely the case: what falls is not seen in advance. Is not what befalls us or descends upon us—coming from above, like destiny or lightning, taking our faces and hands by surprise—exactly what thwarts or undoes our *anticipation*. Anticipation (*anticipare, ante-capere*) apprehends and comprehends in advance, does not let itself be taken by surprise; there is no chance for it.<sup>33</sup>

Following this Derrida suggests that:

there are those who would be inclined to think that unforeseeability conditions the very structure of the event. An event that can be anticipated and therefore apprehended or comprehended, an event without an absolute encounter, is that an event in the full sense of the word? Some would be inclined to say that an event worthy of its name does not announce itself in advance. One must not see it coming. If one anticipates what is coming, which is then outlined horizontally on a horizon, there is no pure event.<sup>34</sup>

For Derrida, it is ‘the work of art’ which makes it possible to engage with the effects of chance and the event as it:

retains for us a general privilege [...] as the place for luck and chance. The work provokes us to think the event. It challenges us to understand chance and luck, to take sight of them, or take them in hand, to inscribe them within a horizon of anticipation. It is at least in this way that they are works, oeuvres, and, in defiance of any program of reception, they make for us an event. Works befall us; they say or unveil what befalls us by befalling us. They overpower us inasmuch as they sort things out with what falls from above. The work is vertical and slightly leaning.<sup>35</sup>

The phrase ‘fear and trembling’, used several times in this chapter by Derrida, is an allusion to the title of one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous essays, in which he discusses the

episode in the Old Testament in which God demands that Abraham sacrifices his beloved son Isaac. Key for both Kierkegaard and Derrida is that Abraham keeps this demand a secret from Isaac and his family, thus transgressing the ethical order. In not revealing God’s demand and his decision to obey it Abraham: [Fig 4]

assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one’s own singularity at the moment of decision. Just as no one can die in my place, no one can make a decision, what we call a ‘decision’ in my place.<sup>36</sup>

To speak would be to lose this absolute singularity and by extension, liberty and responsibility. This goes against the grain of common sense thinking as well as philosophical understanding, in which responsibility would lie precisely in ‘accounting for one’s words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them’, thus ‘involving oneself sufficiently in the generality to



Fig 4: *The Sacrifice of Isaac* by Charlie Gere, after Laurent de la Hire, 1650.

justify oneself, to give an account of one's decision and to answer for one's actions'.<sup>37</sup> However, according to Kierkegaard, Abraham teaches us that to speak and justify oneself according to the 'generality of ethics' in this manner would be irresponsible, in that it involves dissolving one's singularity in the concept'.<sup>38</sup> Ethics, in that it trembles between absolute singularity on the one hand and generality on the other, is therefore aporetic.

The *aporia* is that, if one tries to fulfil one's absolute duty to God out of duty, in the sense of a generality called 'duty' that can be 'mediated and communicated', then one is not fulfilling one's relation to God. Against Kant, Kierkegaard regards acting out of duty, 'in the universalisable sense of the law' a dereliction of absolute duty. From this Kierkegaard shows the necessity of Christ's injunction, quoted in Luke 14:26, for his disciples to hate their mothers and fathers, wives and children, brothers and sisters and even their own lives'. To hate or sacrifice what one already hates is no sacrifice: Only by hating and sacrificing what one loves can one perform one's absolute duty to God, which presumes 'that one denounce, refute and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law',<sup>39</sup> in the name of an absolute duty, which is here 'none other than the name of God as completely other, the nameless name of God as other to which I am bound by an absolute, unconditional obligation, by an incomparable, non-negotiable duty'.<sup>40</sup>

However, Derrida points out if:

God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every bit other. *Tout autre est tout autre* [...] God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originally nonpresent to my ego [...] then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation to every (one) as every (bit) other [*tout autre est tout autre*], in particular my relation to my neighbour or my loved

ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh.<sup>41</sup>

Thus the sacrifice of Isaac 'is shown to possess the very structure of what occurs every day. Through its paradox it speaks of the responsibility required at every moment for every man and every women'.<sup>42</sup>

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is 'no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable', but at the same time it is 'the most common and everyday experience of responsibility'.<sup>43</sup> There is no need to raise a knife over one's son on Mount Moriah. As soon as one enters into a relation with the other one is obliged to sacrifice all the 'infinite number' of others, the other others, to whom one should be bound by the same responsibility. Derrida even asks 'how would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention



Fig 5: Derrida feeding his cat, thus sacrificing all the other cats in the world, by Charlie Gere.

other people?'.<sup>44</sup> [Fig 5]

Derrida's decision to feed his cat and his guilt at not feeding all the other cats, indeed his conflation of the two, is exemplary of the *aporia* of hospitality, which at one level is always conditional and based on context, circumstance, hierarchy and expectations of the capacity to reciprocate. But its force derived from an unconditional and impossible conception of hospitality as absolute welcome of the other. Without this impossible conception of hospitality as absolute and infinite, hospitality of any sort would not be possible, or rather it would not be hospitality. In this it has the same aporetic structure for Derrida as a number of his other concerns, including the gift and justice.

Absolute hospitality is impossible because it would mean giving up our mastery over the space in which we receive our guests, and thus our capacity to be hospitable. But our space is only habitable in that it has doors and windows and thus is open to the outside/stranger (*l'étranger*) and thus to the possibility of granting hospitality. But hospitality always involves mastery and control over our space and whom we invite in and when, and whom we bar from entry. We make laws to distinguish between proper guests and parasites, such as we do with asylum seekers and immigrants.

But it is only by being open to the other that we are constituted as a self. This curious situation is captured in the ambivalence of the word *hôte* in French, which can mean both 'guest' and 'host'. It is the foreigner, or the stranger, who brings into question our capacity for hospitality and thus our self. In this Derrida shows his debt to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, for whom the encounter between the self and the other precedes and is constitutive of the self. Thus there is always a sense that – inasmuch as it is the encounter with the other, the stranger, the potential guest, that makes possible the subjectivity that enables the host to be a host in the first place – the guest is, at some level, also host. At the same time to offer hospitality is always, necessarily and structurally, to risk destruction as a result of the hostility of the enemy, which



Fig 6: *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* by Charlie Gere, after Edouard Manet, 1862–63.

is nicely indicated by the Latin word *hostis* meaning both enemy and guest. Thus to be open to the stranger is to be open to the future, what arrives (*l'à venir/l'avenir*), beyond what we can know, expect or programme for. This is a question of time and temporality. Hospitality 'must await and expect itself to receive the stranger'. 'Hospitality therefore presupposes waiting', 'To wait without waiting, awaiting absolute surprise, the unexpected visitor, awaited without a horizon of expectation'.<sup>45</sup> The history of the avant-garde is a history of hospitality granted, refused and delayed. This can be seen with the name of the great initiatory moment of the avant-garde, the *Salon des Refusés*, the shows organised in the late nineteenth century by artists rejected from the annual exhibition of the supposedly best work being produced, selected by the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and shown at the *Salon de Paris*. Though much of the work shown at the *Salon des Refusés* was probably not particularly good, they did also offer a space for work that was too radically innovative for the Academy.

Incidentally, one of paintings exhibited in the Salon was Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, an image of a shared meal, which prefigures the strategies of relational art. [Fig 6] Marcel Duchamp explicitly played with these questions of hospitality in his submission, in 1917 of a urinal as a work of art, entitled *Fountain*, to an exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists, which had declared that they would exhibit any piece submitted. [Fig 7]

What both *Fountain* and the *Salon des Refusés* demonstrate is that, with the avant-garde, art is posited as something like a stranger that comes looking for hospitality, a demand that forces the gallery or the academy to constitute or reconstitute itself in response, but always belatedly. As something unexpected, unprecedented, it is monstrous in the sense in which that term is applied to those mutations that appear without precedent and thus cannot be incorporated into the normal scheme of things, which in turn will have to be reconceived in order to accommodate these monsters. Thus, in a sense, the avant-garde (the 'advance guard') returns from the future in which it will



Fig 7: *Fountain* by Michael Corris, after Marcel Duchamp, 1917.

have been domesticated and accommodated. Thus it is a *revenant*, a spectre, a ghost (a word the etymology may also be traced to a common root with both guest and host) which 'begins by coming back', and, uninvited, haunts the gallery, demanding to be accommodated. It is spectral and uncanny or, in German, '*unheimlich*', unhomely. If the avant-garde is returning from the future, then it is confronting the present with what that future might be, and demanding that the institutions with which it interacts change in order to accommodate what is to come.

Derrida describes 'the monstrous arrivant', that is 'absolutely foreign or strange' but must be welcomed and accorded hospitality, in order to be open to the future, as that which arrives (*l' à venir/ l'avenir*), beyond what we can know, expect or programme for.

A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. This is the movement of culture. Texts and discourses that provoke at the outset reactions of rejection, that are denounced precisely as anomalies or monstrosities are often texts that, before being in turn appropriated, assimilated, acculturated, transform the nature of the field of reception, transform the nature of social and cultural experience, historical experience. All of history has shown that each time an *event* has been produced, for example in philosophy or poetry, it took the form of the unacceptable, or even of the intolerable, of the incomprehensible, that is, of a certain monstrosity.<sup>46</sup>

In his book *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge shows how questions of singularity and ethics, along with invention and performance, relate directly to the question of the work of art. Though, as the title suggests, Attridge is concerned with literature, he suggests that his book 'could have been [...] about art in the widest sense'.<sup>47</sup> For Attridge, the experience of creating a work of art is bound up with 'letting something happen',<sup>48</sup> something that 'demands to be said', which leaves the author with the sense that 'I am pushing at the limits of what I have hitherto been

able to think'.<sup>49</sup> In this way 'something we might call 'otherness' or 'alterity' or the 'other' is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual's mental world – which is to say, upon a particular cultural field as it is embodied in a single subjectivity'.<sup>50</sup> Yet Attridge also suggests that:

otherness is not something the would-be-creator can simply take hold of, as an idea, a formal possibility, a mathematical equation, lying outside familiar frameworks. The creative mind can only work with the materials to which it has access, and it can have no knowledge beyond these; it therefore has to operate without being sure of where it is going, probing the limits of the culture's givens, taking advantage of their contradictions and tensions, seeking hints of the exclusions on which they depend for their existence, exploring the effects upon them of encounters with the products and practices of other cultures. Accounts of creative activity, in a number of fields, regularly use terms like 'trial and error,' 'hunch,' 'guess,' and 'lucky break'. The very term 'experiment' paradoxically combines the notion of a controlled, repeatable physical process and the unpredictable trying-out of new procedures.<sup>51</sup>

For Attridge, 'to create an artwork' means to 'bring into existence a configuration of cultural materials that [...] holds out the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity'.<sup>52</sup> This is more than simply a question of newness, but more 'a singular encounter and an encounter with singularity'.<sup>53</sup> It is rather that the 'otherness that [is] brought into being by an act of inventive writing [...] implies a wholly new existent that cannot be comprehended by the old modes of understanding, and could not have been predicted by them'.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore this encounter with the work of art's singularity must be repeatable, inasmuch as:

works of art [...] depend on their resistance to accommodation across time; and it is through this resistance that they make further artistic invention possible [...] complete cultural accommodation would spell

the end of the work's existence as art, since it would no longer be received as an other that opens up new possibilities.<sup>55</sup>

For Attridge, this makes the experience of the work of art an experience of responsibility and thus ethical. In responding to the work of art we respond not in terms of a general obligation such as we might define responsibility in relation to 'a wide range of entities, including persons, cultures and the natural environment' but 'a call coming from the work itself – the work as a singular staging of otherness'.<sup>56</sup> A work of art uses the materials of its own and its audience's culture 'in such a way to open onto that which cannot be accounted for by those materials (though they have in fact made possible its emergence)'.<sup>57</sup> Thus:

responding responsibly to a work of art means attempting to do justice to it as a singular other; it involves a judgement that is not simply ethical or aesthetic, and that does not attempt to pigeonhole it or place it on a scale of values, but that operates as an affirmation of the work's inventiveness.<sup>58</sup>

Thus rather than a 'relational aesthetics' or a 'littoral aesthetics' I suggest an 'aesthetics of hospitality'. In a sense this is an acknowledgment of the fact that art cannot, in any explicit or useful sense, be political, at least without ceasing to be art. (And if anyone thinks that is wrong or excessive, perhaps they can name a work of art, as opposed to a polemic or a piece of propaganda, that has made a genuine political difference, in the sense of a difference to people's or other living things' welfare, whether for better or worse). The best art can do is to continually bring to our attention to the contingency of every form of community in the light of our separateness and singularity. The best a work of art (not 'Art') can do, perhaps *all* it can do, is help us imagine what it must be to remain open and hospitable to the Other, by confronting us with its own singularity, never unconditionally,



Fig 8: *Abraham's Hospitality* by Charlie Gere, after Andrei Rublev, c. 1420s.

as that would be impossible, but with unconditional hospitality as our horizon. Here perhaps it is worth remembering another story about Abraham, that of his and his wife Sarah's hospitality to three strangers he encounters in the desert, who turn out to be angels sent from the Lord, and who reward the aged couple with a son, Isaac. In the desert, to be hospitable to strangers is both an obligation and a necessity. [Fig 8] This is perhaps not much and seems a diminished role for art in comparison to other or earlier hopes but it may also be more realistic and, possibly, less dangerous.

### A conversation between Michael Corris and Charlie Gere

Michael Corris: In your presentation you talked about the idea of relational aesthetics and then you talked about this other kind of approach to art, particularly the kind of approach you would recognise as being appropriate to an engagement with an object rather than engagement with a social setting. But to some extent they shared something we have discussed earlier in other contexts – an idea of consummation. How does consummation work in the framework of relational aesthetics? How does it work in the framework of what we might call orthodox aesthetics where aesthetics as such is the promise of something else? And how does it work – if it works at all – in terms of the context of interaction, which is what I associate as being one of the hallmarks of the difference between new media art and other kinds of art?

Charlie Gere: This is somewhat like a question you deal with in your book on Ad Reinhardt; what it means to engage with a work like Reinhardt's late black paintings which are difficult works. The issue you didn't mention in your question was that of time, which is left out of much of the discussion about how we engage with a work of art and how it gains meaning, and in my book *Art Time and Technology*, I did try to talk about some of the ways in which certain kinds of art can engage in certain kinds of experiences of time, which are difficult not in the sense that they are hard to grasp, but in the sense that they take time to grasp. I think that Reinhardt's work is an example of this where you cannot just look at it and immediately grasp what it is doing in an instant. It takes a certain period of consummation, which in itself is a sort of process of deferral that is also a process which opens it out to the possibility of other meanings, opens out the possibility of there being sort of new, as yet unimaginable, kinds of communities that might come about, rather than what Kester seems to be proposing, which is an already pre-existing community with which you can engage. While this may sound

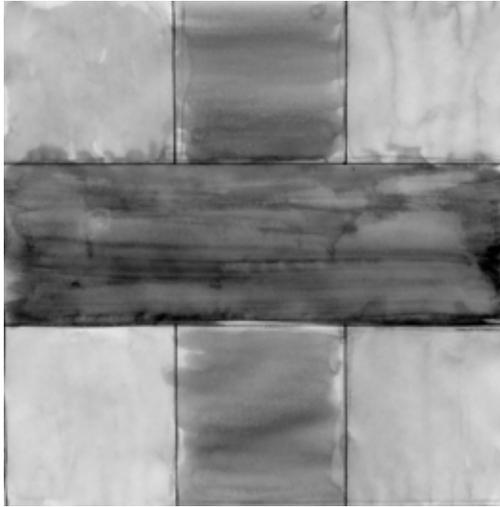


Fig 9: *Abstract Painting* by Michael Corris, after Ad Reinhardt, 1964.

old fashioned, perhaps the object is something you can still only do that with in a way, that possibly you can't with some relationally aesthetic work. [Fig 9]

MC: That's interesting because as you were recounting that, I was thinking that, within interactivity, you've got something that is just the opposite of deferral; it's a kind of a constant engagement and maybe something like what Kester is talking about – he was talking about artists who are specifically orienting themselves in terms of a community or subculture and what they do is not necessarily done for the purpose of creating art but for developing another dimension of social cohesion, another kind of interaction. A dinner party by Rirkrit Tiravanija may be interesting only insofar as something unexpected happens, though the fact that people are very used to the habit of interacting in those kind of social settings means that it's not likely that anything of interest will happen that isn't introduced from the outside. [Fig 10] But when we come to a static object we do, in terms of art, tend to place this demand on it: that it must be infinitely interesting. Phrases like it speaks across

the ages, the sense of transcendence, what is happening, anybody who looks at it will come away with a different idea or value from it, that it always is this plenitude of meaning.

CG: Actually I don't think it is true that works of art do that, they don't speak across the ages; in fact that's precisely what they don't do, they only really speak for quite a short time. They only have a moment in which they can open things out. I often wonder what it would be like to be confronted by a work we now take as completely canonical, let's say, for example, *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Picasso; at the moment when it did actually come into being, it was an event of some sort. It must have been a brief moment and in a sense it is precisely the opposite to what you just suggested, that works of art have a moment in which they open out, then that's it and they then go on to become something different. They go on to an afterlife, a Valhalla for works of art.



Fig 10: Rirkrit Tiravanija cooking at an exhibition in 2002, by Charlie Gere.

MC: They do seem to have a long afterlife otherwise museums would be rather pointless. Not to be naïve, the museum is in the business of persuading the public that the art of the past is worth considering; that the art of the past is a cultural legacy. Perhaps we should distinguish this sort of ‘relevance’ to the kind evoked by artists who see this or that work of art of the past as a resource, a means by which to advance their own practice. Rather than delve into that, I wish to continue to dwell on interaction and perhaps ask the question directly. What is it about new media technology that allows a different kind of experience? What is specific about it that opens up a possibility for these claims for a new kind of experience that’s supposed to be superior to the experience of consummation, the aesthetic experience?

CG: There is a fairly obvious point that is often made is that all art is media art. All art not only uses some kind of medium and has as its substrate some kind of medium, but also art is always absolutely bound up in what is done with a medium, whether it’s painting, sculpture, photography, whatever. So what clearly is not different about new media art for anybody who makes it or confronts it, is that it somehow engages with the specificity of the medium. That it’s new media is by now absurd because it’s not new and even if it were, that would not be an interesting thing in itself. The obvious difference is that in some senses new media art allows in a more obvious kind of interactivity on the part of the audience that no other works of art have really been able to do. That said, something like Alan Kaprow’s happenings would prefigure that, as would some of John Cage’s work, I think. For me, what is interesting about media art is that it addresses that outside of the medium there is nothing. It acknowledges the underlying fact that the basis of art’s transcendent claim, claims of being able to express transcendentally, is always based fundamentally on its materiality and new media art does engage that at a much more self-reflexive and explicit level.

MC: I wanted to ask you about immanence *versus* transcendence. I identified the transcendent experience with the aesthetic moment or engagement, but immanence too seems to be something that’s come into religious discourse after the Reformation. Is there something we could do with that, can we use that? Do you think it’s a trend where we’re looking for things to have this meaning rather than outside?

CG: Rather than in or through religion?

MC: Yes, and how does this impact on what an artist does? Why do artists need to talk about it and think about it?

CG: Well, they have to think about religion because it remains implicitly the hidden thing that underpins all art, whether you like it or not ... this is very important. If I go to an art gallery I am looking at objects that are thoroughly imbued with an implied metaphysics or transcendence but also in a sense immanently, in that they try to do that without necessarily making transcendent claims, but they are absolutely acting for us in that way. However, I think that much contemporary art right now is explicitly religious. I’m thinking of people like Olafur Eliasson, Bill Viola, Anish Kapoor, and others who make no bones about the fact they are aiming at some level to give an experience of transcendence.

MC: Would you like to expand? For example, in relation to Eliasson. I think almost everyone would be familiar with his Turbine Hall exhibition at Tate Modern and might have even visited it and, dare I say, ‘experienced’ it.

CG: That is a very good example of a work of art that is so obviously an attempt – and a very successful attempt – to imbue art with something like a religious experience. It involves a kind of transcendent aesthetic experience, albeit one created materially out of lights and mirrors and so forth, but one which seems to allude

to something way beyond itself. Also it is thoroughly religious in that it builds a kind of community. The installation in the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern involved a mirror running across the length of the ceiling and people would gather to see themselves reflected there, treating the whole thing as a community that was brought together, a community that was made by the structure of the piece and its temporal nature at that moment. I think that it is a fundamentally religious piece, unashamedly and uncritically so, in that it involves no attempt at a political critique nor any attempt to engage with the issues in making a work of art in such a museum, which brings those kinds of communities together. So there's a lot of this uncritical religiosity at play in art at the moment.

MC: I think we have to look closely at what sort of community Eliasson's work does constitute. It's a different sort of social constellation, clearly, than the sort one finds in a village, or a 1960s' commune, or people waiting at a bus stop. It seems to me a very primitive type of community, more like a gathering or a mob. But to return to your last remark, what would Eliasson's work be like if it was critical? Would it have to be like Ad Reinhardt's negativity?

CG: I don't know what you could do. It seems that once Reinhardt took negativity about as far as you can go, he left people either having to be unashamedly explicitly religious in a non-negative or even a positive sense, or having to deal with it ironically. I suppose the only way that that work such as Eliasson's could have engaged with implications of its own spirituality would have been to bring some element of irony. But it was completely unironic in the way that Anish Kapoor's work also is. Kapoor has filled the Turbine Hall with a similar work, and he seems to be absolutely happy to allow art to be the replacement for a spiritual experience that replaces religion in a very particular way without any kind of critique of that move. The one aspect of art that actually does engage with critiquing the transcendent implications

of art would be new media art because it absolutely acknowledges the materiality that gives a work like that of Kapoor's its sense of spirituality. Eliasson's work is essentially a bunch of lights and other kinds of technologies but it doesn't reflect upon its own technicity. What I'm looking for here is that the definition of the kind of work I would call new media art is that which actually engages with the question of what it does, what the technology itself does, how the technology works. The interesting thing is that, or reasons I think are very closely bound up with this new media art, so called, those who define themselves as new media artists working within a certain kinds of ways of thinking about technology, do not get into mainstream galleries much. I'm thinking of people like net artists, people like Thompson and Craighead, Vuc Cosic, the Irrational Organisation, and Heath Bunting as well as artists making work involving robotics, interactivity, genetics, and so on. Such work often involves a deliberate use of technologies in ways that are often very well founded, very highly-wrought, technologically sophisticated. Technology is often as much the subject as the means of the work of art, and the reason perhaps why new media art does not get into galleries such as Tate is because it involves an implicit or explicit disavowal of the way that art makes transcendent claims only by disavowing its own technicity. By contrast, an underlying presumption of art in a gallery like the Tate is that the means a work of art might use are not the point; the point is what it's trying to say with those means and the way it's trying to transcend those means; for example, by saying that this work is about a great sun in a cathedral-like space, and not about a certain use of lights and mirrors. This is a signal difference between new media art and other kinds of art in a world where all artists to some extent are involved with media. New media art is self-consciously technical, not just in the sense that it uses technology but in that it involves an engagement with its own technicity in a way that deconstructs the transcendence of art.

MC: That suggests a couple of interesting avenues of investigation. Does the creation of networks allow one to develop a kind of social cohesion or community that in any way satisfies the same demand that you would get in the experience of work of art?

CG: You mean social networks?

MC: Yes; where do social networks fit into this? One might think that that may be the answer to the question, to the critique of relational aesthetics.

CG: I've recently got a Facebook page and it's been fascinating to engage with the ideas of community and interaction and so forth that these social networks seem to allow you to engage with. Social networks would almost seem to be a Utopian answer to certain dreams both of ever more fluid global communities, and at the same time the place where art and life will come together. In a sense, social networks seem to do, in a much less self-conscious way, what a lot of what relational aesthetics might claim to do: to bring communities together in a constructed way. Actually I think the experience of these social networks is exactly where an ethical problem arises in terms of a failure to allow for a proper confrontation with the Other. Such networks are highly mediated and yet seem to involve an ever greater disavowal of that mediation; they are also bringing a set of questions about what the social means and how we need to think about the social. On Myspace I discovered that Tom, one of the founders who is now a corporate entity and every subscriber's first 'friend', has 228 million friends, which begs the question of what we mean when we use the word 'friend', as well as a whole set of questions about our social existence. Such networks need to be counterbalanced by some space in which we can still encounter something which we cannot subsume in the mediated way that we find in these social networks. I have terrible image of ever

more selecting, self-projecting forms of community in which people only ever hang around with people like themselves. We are increasingly no longer obliged through these networks to really confront the difficulties of otherness that lies simply in the physical encounter between people.

MC: In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor asks us to consider the changed status of religion in today's world. But he's quite subtle on this point, noting that one can question whether religion is really in decline today at all. Taylor suggests that if we interpret religion to mean something other than the 'historic faiths' in the West (Judaism and Christianity) and the existence of supernatural beings, then yes, religion has declined. But, if you mean spirituality or something very much like the spiritual, then the question of religion's decline is not settled. Taylor tries to get to the bottom of secularisation, as well, and displays a comparable degree of scepticism regarding the various explanations that have been advanced to account for this process. But it is his notion of the proliferation of spiritual beliefs that seems to me to be most relevant to your concerns about society's avoidance of otherness and the popularity of Internet-based networking. People exercise a high degree of selectivity with respect to their social relations and their spiritual preferences; technology, in the form of the Internet, is a tool that can enhance selectivity and centralise it as a strategy for being in the world. One can avoid a great deal that is deemed 'unpleasant' and still have contact with fellow human beings. Or one may role play with the knowledge that there is not much risk attached. In much the same way, spiritual beliefs that are highly individuated and expressivist allow a similar latitude and opportunity for evading the mutuality demanded by the West's historic faiths. Today no person can claim the right to say which spirituality represents the higher good without the risk of coming under suspicion and inviting contempt; one must 'respect' all spiritual beliefs today, no matter how repulsive or shallow or selfish. What remains is a supermarket of spirituality, like

the central texts of the World faiths that are made available to visitors at the Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas. Or, the two-dozen categories of a recent exhibition on the subject of art and religion since the Romantic era, *Traces du Sacré*. This seems like freedom to some; a great liberation from the domination of the historic faiths and overall an increase in autonomy. What the exhibition *Traces du Sacré* shows is that it is a good thing that there is no end in sight to the proliferation of spiritual beliefs. Wordsworth voicing his despair of the modern world, wishing he could become ‘a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn’ rather than continue to live like an outsider to Nature, is no match for modern theories of team building, LinkedIn or Facebook.

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