

*Contingent Factors:
A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"*

This tension between democracy and liberalism should not be conceived as one existing between two principles entirely external to each other and establishing between themselves simple relations of negotiation. Were the tension conceived this way, a very simplistic dualism would have been instituted.

—Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (2001)

Tracey Emin has such a visceral and direct way of using language that any review sounds hopelessly lame by comparison. But behind a wretched self-image, girlish romanticism reveals a sweeter Tracey.

—Claire Bishop, "The Sweeter Side of Tracey,"
Evening Standard (May 2, 2001)

The uncritical reinforcement of leading market figures and the analytical peculiarities that remain from Claire Bishop's days as a journalist cannot be disguised in her recent essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" (*October* 110 [Fall 2004], pp. 51–79). There are lucid moments, due particularly to her determination to seek a route away from the problems created by the increasing evacuation of critical relationships to society in a culture of political consensus. However, a text has been produced that undermines the usually high standards of *October* in relation to its checking of sources, reference points, and the application of critical methods to contemporary cultural discourse. These standards have been replaced by sallow techniques more familiar in a right-wing tabloid newspaper.¹

Up to a point this is understandable, since there has been a great deal of rather rushed rear-guard action in British and American quarters in reaction to

1. The *Evening Standard* is part of Associated Newspapers Limited, where alongside the *Daily Mail* it has been a staunch bastion against the processes of critique and progress. It is unthinkable that anyone educated in England would consider contributing to a newspaper group with such an appalling record of pro-Apartheid, pro-Thatcher, and anti-Union positioning, on top of a record of Anti-Semitism in the 1930s, which has been followed up by a consistent and well-documented xenophobia ever since, including current campaigns against so-called "asylum seekers." Other examples of Bishop's writing for the *Evening Standard* may be found at www.thisislondon.co.uk and include these thoughts on the work of Rachel Whiteread: "Despite this, major aesthetic swoons are virtually guaranteed elsewhere. . . . Each work has choked and smothered another object in order to be made, and this deathly process adds a psychological frisson to your sensuous rush. Whiteread is rightly acclaimed as one of our best sculptors, and this show is chilly perfection for hot days ahead" (Claire Bishop, "Cool Steps to Star Status," *Evening Standard*, June 26, 2001).

the popularity and influence of Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*. Dealing primarily with work produced more than ten years ago, the book has come to renewed attention in light of the increasing commodification and marketing of critical art discourse. The problem with Bourriaud's text, however, is that while it has prompted both a serious debate in some quarters, elsewhere it has been uncritically accepted. Unfortunately, Bishop's essay does not rise to the level of serious critique nor even-handed debate; rather than offer a detailed consideration of Bourriaud's work, it looks instead for other targets and generates a muddled analysis of four established male artists in lieu of a more focused critique of the ideas and implications of *Relational Aesthetics*.

The fact of the matter is that Bourriaud's book has been at the center of both careful and critical elucidation since the moment of its publication—the text itself was a direct product of a specific and ongoing debate. *Relational Aesthetics* was the result of informal argument and disagreement among Bourriaud and some of the artists referred to in his text.² Its content has been known to them for nearly a decade, and most of those involved, including Bourriaud, have developed new reactions to the text and revised their thinking since its publication. The book does contain major contradictions and serious problems of incompatibility with regard to the artists repeatedly listed together as exemplars of certain tendencies. Yet the crucial fact is that *Relational Aesthetics* was written as a response to the artists whose work it discusses. It was part of a process of critical distancing by the author in order to separate himself from the implicated, early role he had played as curator of many of the group exhibitions in which these artists may have been involved, although notable absentees from these early projects included both Rirkrit Tiravanija and me, both of whom are discussed in the book. The texts that form the book came to fruition during and after Bourriaud's experience with the exhibition *Traffic* at the CAPC Bordeaux in 1996 (not 1993 as incorrectly stated in Bishop's text).³ The press office of the Bordeaux art center, having misread the work, mistakenly communicated to the public the idea that the structures in the exhibition were primarily a form of what can best be

2. At the time of *Traffic*, I wrote the following: "Now the question is, does the process of misunderstanding begin and end with the artists or the institution? At this point, historically, it appears to reside with the idea and actions of the curator. Not that you are wrong to bring together some people who seem to share some similar structural approaches and interests. The problem is that the whole question of the curatorial model is not being examined in the same way that artists have been encouraged to look at the classical ideas of the author and the ego over the last thirty years. It is clear that you are willing to engage with different values of production that go beyond the substitution of auratic documentation or structures in place of the traditional auratic object, but cannot operate effectively with these ideas when you keep coming up against organizational models that encourage the curator to act like an ultra-artist, even if he or she doesn't want to" (Liam Gillick, private correspondence with Nicolas Bourriaud, November 1996).

3. The first texts were published in *Documents sur l'art* in 1995 and were not brought together into the book *Relational Aesthetics* until 1998. The exhibition *Traffic* occurred in the middle of this process and was the moment that forced Bourriaud into a position where he could no longer operate without defining his position in relation to the artists with whom he was working.

described as “interactive-baroque-conceptualism.”⁴ This left Bourriaud under attack from some artists who felt that their positions were more complex than that and from the visitors who had been thwarted in their attempts to literally “interact” with almost everything in the show (during the opening of the exhibition many works were destroyed by well-meaning but overeager visitors who had been encouraged to directly interact with the work by the director and the education department of the art center). Bourriaud found himself in a complicated situation in which he was obliged to gather together and develop recent essays in order to articulate his position in relation to the artists, something that had seemed unnecessary in the formative years of the early nineties when a peculiar coalition of interests had developed to fight the conservative rump of the eighties art world.

Bourriaud predicted in the foreword to *Relational Aesthetics*: “Too often people are happy drawing up an inventory of yesterday’s concerns, the better to lament the fact of not getting any answers.”⁵ A clear-minded attack on the complexity and contradiction of Bourriaud’s book has not been attempted in Bishop’s text. Instead, a set of artists has been shoehorned into a battle about intellectual territory that merely compounds the problems inherent in *Relational Aesthetics*. The result is an unfortunate, tag-team face-off between the rather melancholic avant-gardism of Thomas Hirschhorn and the somewhat exploitative reflections of the dominant culture that are reinforced by Spaniard Santiago Sierra, pitched against my own convoluted, occasionally opaque and imploded practice and Tiravanija’s production of sites for the examination of exchange and control (and eating and drinking and playing table-football). On top of this strained confrontation it is not possible to mask the fact that Bishop’s text is replete with willful errors of fact and

4. The term is my own: “It is interesting to see what happens when this kind of artist comes up against an institution whose values are rooted in a professionalization of the apparent openness of the late sixties and seventies. For a few years the CAPC has put on a consistently impressive program geared towards artists like Mario Merz and Lawrence Weiner. In terms of what the place has been able to offer these artists, the CAPC must be considered important. So why was the exhibition *Traffic* a relatively straightforward and problematic affair? There are two main reasons. One is that the CAPC may have thought it was a conceptual show, albeit not as ‘resolved’ but certainly operating as a new form of content-full conceptualized approach, and secondly, that by denying access to the preproduction and postproduction aspects of the show they ensured that the defining quality of the exhibition was improvisation and interactivity rather than the ideas that truly inform what is taking place and are outlined above. The CAPC handed over a degree of responsibility to an outside curator (Nicolas Bourriaud), but they still define the atmosphere of the place, both structurally and literally. Something is being worked through and the key to the misreadings encouraged by a show like *Traffic* are that attempts to pin down the potential of the artists involved end up using two fundamentally incorrect assumptions about the work. The first is the myth of interactivity and the second is the over-reliance on an idea of the really real. Making far too much of the quasi-Duchampian tendency of recent artists to bring temporarily un-art-like structures rather than the recent tendency to just bring un-art-like objects into the gallery space. A focus on the interactive potential of work and the structural aspect of its arrangement closes the gap between what has been done and the most important work of people like James Coleman, Michael Asher, and Douglas Huebler, so it is no surprise that it leads to misreadings. The work, at worst, becomes merely a form of content heavy baroque post-conceptualism.” See Liam Gillick, “Ill Tempo,” *Flash Art* 188 (June 1996).

5. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 7.

method.⁶ An example of the latter: throughout the text Bishop extensively quotes museum guides, pamphlets, and mainstream art criticism in relation to Tiravanija and me, as if these reflect our ideas and ideology, yet allows developed cultural theory and the words of the artists to speak for Sierra and Hirschhorn. What did these two poor artists do to deserve this hollow victory over the supposed good-time vanguard of liberal progressiveness? For Bishop proudly reports Hirschhorn and Sierra's feelings of hopelessness in the face of the dominant culture and turns their words into a populist assertion that "art can't change anything." In this case they are being used—as they have often used working-class people; they are employed to bulldoze the houses of their relatives, because Bishop can't make sense of the prime suspect's (Bourriaud's) testimony.

A text so full of contentious statements and willful omissions requires a detailed response, exposing its false dichotomies, which have depressing consequences for anyone who might believe in the potential of a radical reconsideration of the conditions of production of art. First, however, some of the errors of fact: *Relational Aesthetics* was first published in 1998, not 1997 as reported (p. 53); its title in French is not spelled *Esthétique Relationnel* but *Esthétique relationnelle* (also p. 53). Throughout her text, Bishop tends to muddle ideas from both *Relational Aesthetics* and Bourriaud's later book *Post-Production*. It is not true that the Palais de Tokyo "remained bare and unfinished" (p. 51). Its extensive renovation and remodeling was completed within two months of its opening date by architects who installed lighting and white walls and all the other trappings of a conventional art space, including bookshop, café, and information kiosks.⁷ Bourriaud was not a curator at the CAPC, he simply curated an exhibition there (p. 51); nor was he the editor but an editor of *Documents sur l'art*, along with Eric Troncy (p. 51). When Bishop mentions that the Palais de Tokyo model has become a paradigm she footnotes a list of institutions and events that opened before the Palais de Tokyo (p. 51). The list of errors is extensive—I have barely progressed beyond the first page—and it continues in this manner page after page, including the captions to the images of art works, which in my case are swapped and incorrectly credited. While fact-checking is not the rule within academic journals, Bishop's errors indicate poor standards of research on her part.

6. For example, *The Pinboard Project* (1992) is used to further Bishop's arguments via a willful misreading of the text that visibly accompanies each work, which could easily have been avoided by actually looking at the work. The term used throughout my work is "users," never "owners," and this project is precisely about who the public for the work might be and how culture is made rather than a private moment for included individuals. There is no point where the use of the work is limited to an art audience, nor does the work lack specifically complex tensions in relation to context. At Monika Spruth Gallery in 1992, the pinboard contained information about the rights of Romany people in contemporary Germany and instructions on how to become involved in a struggle for cross-border recognition.

7. The architects of the Palais de Tokyo were Lacaton and Vassal: "Their big break was the Palais de Tokyo contemporary art gallery in Paris, completed in 2001. The project, a bare bones reclamation of a semiderelict art deco building near the Seine, was shortlisted for the Mies van der Rohe prize in 2003 and has been immensely influential as perhaps the most extreme of found-space galleries" (Kieran Long, "Lacaton & Vassal," *Icon* 20 [February 2005], p. 57).

In his introduction to the cluster of texts in *October* 110 that focus on *Relational Aesthetics*, George Baker claims that Bourriaud may be unaware of the historical precedents to the artists mentioned in the book, even claiming that Bourriaud “dismisses” these artists “with a sneer.” He finishes by asserting that the book and the artists associated with it emphasize “conviviality and celebration.” It is not clear to what part of the work under consideration in Bishop’s essay this might apply, but it is clear that we are going to have to work hard to find new progressive models in a text that instead relies on melancholy and failure in art as a comforting reinforcement of existing social models. To telescope Bishop’s argument: an absent critique of *Relational Aesthetics* is used to set up a misapplication of the notion of antagonism in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to two artists (Tiravanija and me) without revealing the foundation of these artists’ works or their ideas beyond that which has been presented by various institutional frameworks or mainstream journalists.⁸ These absences are compounded by a breathless description of her experience of works by two more artists, Hirschhorn and Sierra, both of whom are men: it seems as if Bourriaud is not the only one who has failed to learn the lessons of feminist practice and critique from the seventies.⁹ Both artists have clearly titillated the writer and activated her journalistic taste for art that supposedly upsets or disturbs the dominant system, playing on a petit-bourgeois hunger for art that either humiliates or taunts its human material, as well as for art conceived as an easily exchanged conceptual singularity that can be simply described and therefore passed on to weary insiders in search of some new form of amusement in the art context.¹⁰ Yet Hirschhorn and Sierra are also done a disservice in an essay that ultimately suggests that they are involved in a relationship of complicity with a dominant power structure. This is an example of an essay remaining content to keep pointing out cartoon variations of power relationships, while the true complexity at the heart of our culture is allowed to mutate and consume relationships regardless. Anyone who has witnessed Hirschhorn’s *24 Hour Foucault* at the Palais de Tokyo (yes, that Palais de Tokyo) would know that things

8. In “Right-wing Populism: The Mistakes of the Moralistic Response” (*Populism, The Reader* [New York: Lukas & Sternberg Press, 2005]), Mouffe writes: “The role of critical artistic practices is not to create consensus, but to foster the participation of a multiplicity of voices in the democratic agon, thereby helping to mobilize passions towards democratic objectives” (p. 68). In her text, Bishop simplistically posits Tiravanija and me in the role equivalent to the “third-way” politician against the apparently engaged work of Hirschhorn and Sierra. Another reading of Mouffe would place Hirschhorn, Sierra, and Bishop herself in the role of the populist opportunist who overwrites the complexity of a true engagement with the unresolvable tension between liberalism and democracy.

9. “. . . as well as Bourriaud’s seeming ignorance of the direct historical precedents to his proclamations of aesthetic innovation, ranging from Fluxus to South American artists such as Lygia Clark to almost the entire project(s) of feminist art practice in the 1970s and ‘80s” (George Baker, “Introduction,” *October* 110 [Fall 2004], p. 50).

10. Bishop’s interest in such work is mirrored in her journalism for the *Evening Standard*, which has also tended to discuss artists who lend themselves to easy and spectacular passage of easily understood ideas, such as Rachel Whiteread, Tracey Emin, and Andres Serrano, as opposed to artists where a degree of complexity and confusion is necessary to understand their work, such as Sigmar Polke. See, for example, Claire Bishop, “Rambling Doodles Fail to Impress,” *Evening Standard*, December 18, 2000.

are more complicated than they seem.¹¹ Things get truly interesting when art goes beyond a reflection of the rejected choices of the dominant culture and attempts to address the actual processes that shape our contemporary environment. This is the true nature of Mouffe's plea for a more sophisticated understanding of the paradox of liberal democracy, which concerns the recognition of the antagonism suppressed within consensus-based models of social democracy, not merely a simple two-way relationship between the existing sociopolitical model and an enlightened demonstration of its failings. Bishop's evident pleasure in seeing poor people set to work by lazy artists was reinforced in a recent issue of *Artforum*, where it was revealed that she is also a fan of a work by Francis Alÿs involving the use of a large number of people to move a mountain.¹² There appears to be a biblical aspect to her interests that requires further investigation elsewhere.

It is not true that so-called "relational art" insists on use rather than contemplation. Bishop accompanies this claim with a revealing assertion that it is often hard to identify who has made a specific work. This may also be true for a visitor to the National Gallery in London who is unfamiliar with pre-twentieth-century art, but it is not a rigorous critical statement. Another crucial early misreading in the text relates to artists who have involved themselves in the remodeling or troubleshooting of what Bishop describes as "amenities [in a] museum" (p. 52). Citing several examples, she misreads Hal Foster's earlier critique of the work of certain contemporary artists by artificially separating these "amenity works" from the general art work that they do, as if they have made themselves available as interior-design consultants in addition to their normal work.¹³ In the case of the café at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, my reworking of it during my exhibition there in 2002 was an art work that I knew would be allowed to exist beyond the normal confines of an exhibition timetable; it was not some extra service performed at the request of a curator or director.¹⁴ It was even marked as such with a wall label.¹⁵ This may be an act open to criticism in Foster's terms, but it is not because of any "service-orientated" aspect of the gesture. The reading room by Apolonija Sustersic mentioned in Bishop's text was also an art work, as were all the other examples cited. Bishop's misunderstandings mean that she will have to ignore most of Renée Green's work, along with that of Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, and many other contemporary artists who have provided spaces for the perusal or consideration of detailed materials within exhibition structures. While

11. *24 Hour Foucault* was on view at the Palais de Tokyo from October 2–3, 2004.

12. Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), mentioned by Claire Bishop in "Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain," *Artforum* 43, no. 10 (Summer 2005), p. 291.

13. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

14. Liam Gillick, *The Wood Way*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, May 3–June 23, 2002.

15. This use of nontraditional institutional spaces for or as art has been connected to a rejection of the historical gendering of art spaces into hierarchical relations and an embrace of issues of design and decoration that are also historically biased in gender terms. It would be instructive here to consider the work by Maria Lind at the Kunstverein München over the last few years.

it is convenient for Bishop to ignore the fact that some artists have extended the scope of the supposedly appropriate places or arenas for their work, it reveals a neotraditional stance that seems ignorant of changes in artistic practice over the last fifteen years.

Bishop moves on to condemn a number of artists mentioned in *Relational Aesthetics* for having been involved in various biennials, triennials, and manifestas over the last ten years. This is a change that she makes without any citation or examples to back it up. Certainly it is not the case with my own practice, but it absolutely is the case for Sierra and Hirschhorn, the two artists upon whom she focuses. (These two artists have arguably found their niche in international exhibitions, to their advantage, with work that relies on a large distracted audience to generate the right degree of verbal commodity exchange around its existence within a larger structure.)¹⁶ Regardless of the complex ideology behind the work, “Have you seen the blocked-up pavilion?,” “Have you been to the Bataille bar?” or “Have you seen the tattooed and humiliated workers?” is far easier to share than, “Have you seen the thing that was the backdrop for the writing of a book that exists only in parallel to the structure here yet attempts to decode the way ethical traces find form in the built world?” There is a difference between reading Gilles Deleuze and putting a Deleuze book in your work, but we are denied an opportunity to unravel these implications and have to settle for an approach on Bishop’s part that is tinged with a neopopulist attack on a notional elite and that draws us back into a straightforward simplification of Mouffe’s argumentation. Mouffe has carefully outlined a useful critique of the irresolvable tensions inherent in Western constructions of liberal democracy. While it is tempting to try to layer a broad outline of her ideas onto artists engaged in contemporary practice, the artists chosen by Bishop fail to be useful subjects in this instance. All are more or less working in a tradition of individual production and reception that is presented within an established art context. Mouffe is not calling for more friction within some of the structures proposed within such a context, but is elaborating an argument against the kind of social structuring that would produce a recognizable art “world” in the first place. Therefore, it is a misreading of Mouffe’s ideas to attempt to apply this specific critique of social and political relations to marginally different approaches to engaging with the multiple participant/audiences for contemporary art. Mouffe’s arguments are for a new social model, in addition to a modification of appearances and behaviors within the existing social framework. Whether one presents a reading area related to Bataille, a social space for the exchange of ideas and tea, or a designated zone for the consideration of the implications of moments of exchange within urban society, all of these gestures outline new approaches to

16. I have taken part in *Documenta X* and performed an advisory role in “Utopia Station” during the Venice Biennale in 2003. This should be contrasted with Hirschhorn and Sierra’s central role in *Documenta* and a national pavilion during the Venice Biennale. I do not think that their presence in these large international exhibitions inherently corrupts or undermines their work any more than it might do the same to Tiravanija’s or my work, and vice versa.

addressing the suppression of meaningful exchange in a consensus culture. There is more in common among the subjects of Bishop's text than she is prepared to reveal. The implication that Hirschhorn and Sierra upset more people than Tiravanija and I do does not mean that they are closer to Mouffe's notion of antagonism; rather, all four of us are, at best, engaged in an ongoing sequence of arguments in relation to one another and the broader culture that, when taken as a whole, is a limited yet effective demonstration of the potential of a new recognition of tensions within established models of social relations.

The section of Bishop's essay on Tiravanija is full of spurious statements. The comment that food and trash became the work at 303 Gallery in New York in 1992 again misunderstands the structure of the work itself. The whole situation was the work, not one element of it that Bishop has substituted in a desperate search for a proxy object of contemplation. She has been taught to reject such a substitute auratic object, yet she returns again and again to a desperate search for the singular auratic signifier to covet and assess in the manner of an enlightened collector in search of a "souvenir" to retain from the work of an interesting and socially conscious artist. Quoting Udo Kittleman's writing on Tiravanija's exhibition *Untitled (Tomorrow is Another Day)* (1996), is also problematic as the former's opinions are part of a typical gallery director's foreword and not particularly worthy of quotation. Nor is the following statement about Hirschhorn from the preface to his exhibition catalog for a show at the CAC Malaga in 2001 particularly noteworthy: "The materials used—cardboard, tinfoil, plastic, books, and wood, amongst others—show the enormous possibilities that recycling has in contemporary art."¹⁷ Such statements are typical in exhibition catalog forewords, and a serious journal should not reproduce them without qualification unless another agenda is at work. The concurrent issue raised about the embrace of Tiravanija himself as a commodity is based on bogus projection. He is neither unique in nor does he lack a context for his stress on the implicated role of the artist in relation to her or his work. This revealing of one's self within the work is an important legacy of postcolonial and feminist discourses that deemphasize and exaggerate the historical construction of artistic persona. The fact that Bishop is seemingly unfamiliar with the many artists who travel and involve themselves in the manifestations of their work does not mean that Tiravanija is implicated in the same kinds of processes going on in Starbucks or with job outsourcing. Bishop has misapplied Mouffe's visionless construction of agonistic social binarism, overstating its potential and thereby rendering Hirschhorn and Sierra too democratic and Tiravanija and me too neoliberal.

When Bishop turns to my own work, chronology and concepts collapse or disappear. She initially lists a number of activities that she claims I am involved in from sculpture to writing novellas, yet these latter, supposedly secondary activities

17. Francisco de la Torre Prados, "Introductory Text," in Thomas Hirschhorn, *United Nations Miniature*, exh. cat. (Malaga, Spain: CAC Malaga, 2001), p. 71.

actually make up my artistic practice. When she does mention a book, *Erasmus Is Late*, she calls it a “publication,” leaving the reader to believe it could be anything from a pamphlet to a catalog.¹⁸ It was in fact a book that operated in parallel to a number of exhibition structures in the early 1990s around the time that the ideas behind *Relational Aesthetics* were coming together. The text is about the corrupted legacy of the Enlightenment, as well as the implications raised by the lack of a revolution in Britain in the late eighteenth century. The narrative develops by way of a conversation between a number of characters including Masaru Ibuka, the cofounder of Sony, and Erasmus Darwin, the older brother of Charles Darwin. It is strange and disingenuous at best to suggest therefore that my work deals with abstractions such as “context,” “compromise,” or “open-endedness” as its subject. These are not the subjects of this work, but the prevalent conditions in society that are exposed and critiqued through some of the projects of objects, texts, and other activities that relate to a later book titled *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre* from 1997.¹⁹ This too is not a book about open-endedness or compromise; it is a critique of these things, which would be clear if she had once mentioned this book or the other specific writings that occupy a crucial role in my artistic practice.²⁰ The art work related to the text *Discussion Island* formed a backdrop that allowed the book to be developed, hence the “Discussion Platforms” from the late 1990s that projected a specific site for consideration of the specific ideas involved. All this built toward a text that was subsequently made available for free or in the form of the cheap book during the exhibition. There is nothing vague or open-ended about such a function of art in relation to the production of ideas.

Her bafflement about the territory that the work addresses is puzzling, as she knows that it has circled around these key texts. Also absent is any reference to *McNamara* (1992), which investigated the compromises and errors of U.S. foreign policy in the sixties, and *Literally No Place* (2002), a text that sought new ways to go beyond the stifling neoliberalism of the present (the victory of speculation over planning) and to find ethical traces in the built world that surrounds us.²¹ These books carry precise and clear ideas and structures within them, operate in parallel to other structures in an art context, and are revealed through titles, wall texts, and other forms of information that ought to have rendered Bishop’s confusion impossible. *Literally No Place* was published and freely available during the exhibition *The Wood Way* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2002, which could not have

18. Liam Gillick, *Erasmus Is Late* (London: Book Works, 1995).

19. Liam Gillick, *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre* (Ludwigsburg: Kunstverein Ludwigsburg; Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1997).

20. This is a confusion and an absence that seems to have evaded other writers about the work who have often tended to make the opposite mistake, overdetermining the text in relation to the other production. Other relevant and central texts include: *Underground Man* by Gabriel Tarde, updated by Liam Gillick (Brussels: Les Maîtres des Forme; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2004); and “Looking Backward 2000–1887,” by Edward Bellamy, with a cover design by Matthew Brannon (Leipzig: Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, 1998). All of these publications have led to specific exhibition structures.

21. Liam Gillick, *McNamara* (Cologne: Galerie Esther Schipper, 1992). Liam Gillick, *Literally No Place* (London: Book Works, 2002).

evaded her attention. While it is hard to imagine that Bishop is unaware of these texts, it is quite clear that their existence would make the task of going after Bourriaud much more difficult using the techniques that she has resorted to in the essay, so they have simply disappeared.

If one accepts the existence of a decade or more of writing that exists in parallel to physical objects and other manifestations of ideas, it is impossible to state, as Bishop does in her essay, that “[Gillick’s] entire output is governed by the idea of ‘scenario thinking’” (p. 61). Proceeding to admit that she doesn’t understand the writings, she goes on to say that they are nonspecific, whereas any cursory reading will reveal extremely precise references, situations, and statements.²² The earlier misreading of intent in relation to the bar at the Whitechapel Gallery is repeated in relation to projects of mine in Brussels and Stuttgart. Both were invitations to produce art for specific urban contexts. In each case the commissioning cultural body was the city and state. Neither case involved “troubleshooting” (p. 61) anything, but instead the expectation was that I would propose an art work. If Bishop or the editors had cared to check the text they would have discovered that my response in both situations was extremely specific and pointed in relation to contemporary urban conditions. In Brussels I used the available budget to renovate and improve the foyers of the oldest public housing unit in the city on the condition that it not be considered an art work. This was not the desire of the Foundation Roi Baudouin, which would have preferred a discrete art object, and I spent my entire fee on ensuring that the building got its foyers against the wishes of the commissioning body.²³ In Stuttgart I collaborated with a New York–based collective of architects (Open Office) in order to ensure that a plaza close to the Porsche headquarters could not be claimed as an extension of Porsche’s corporate identity via their occupation of the space with their own “improvements” to the area. My proposal was rejected in favor of work by an artist who restricted herself to the surface of the street. This allowed Porsche to go ahead and occupy the former public space of the remaining plaza. These are crucial and extraordinary errors in Bishop’s text that change the meaning and direction of the entire argument. They cannot be allowed to stand without reply and correction. Bishop follows them by the repeated statement that the middle ground and compromise are what interest me most, which is true of one aspect of the work related to a specific critique of urban development processes in a post-utopian environment in the book *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre*, but not of the other work that has been produced before or since.

One could go on. It is hardly a pleasant business, but the essay’s shoddy “method” and reactionary claims need to be countered. Using newspaper critic Jerry Saltz’s impressions of Tiravanija’s exhibition at 303 Gallery is never matched by similar journalistic accounts of the work of Hirschhorn and Sierra, of which there is a

22. For example, the establishment of commune structures in postwar America in *Literally No Place* and the ongoing privatization of the public sphere in *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre*.

23. The Foundation Roi Baudouin is a state-run cultural funding body in Belgium.

great deal.²⁴ Saltz's impressions tell us almost nothing about Tiravanija's work and a lot about Saltz. When Bishop asks of Tiravanija's exhibition at the Köln Kunstverein, "Who is the 'everyone' here?" (p. 68), it is quite obviously anyone who wants to walk through the open doors into the free exhibition. In a footnote where Saltz is quoted yet again—stating, "What would the Walker Art Center do if a certain homeless man scraped up the price of admission to the museum and chose to sleep on Tiravanija's cot all day, every day?"—there is no attempt to remind the reader that museums and art centers in Europe are often free, therefore rendering Saltz's anxiety about audience and admission somewhat provincial. The question "Is it art?" is a standard of British journalism and Bishop continues that patronizing tradition by continuing to parrot it (p. 68). On my visit, late at night, to Tiravanija's exhibition, I came across exactly the kind of diverse group of local people that she claims to be excluded by the purview of the project. The work was used by locals as a venue, a place to hang out and somewhere to sleep. I doubt that she was ever there.

When Bishop returns to my work, we are once more faced with poor research and a lazy approach. Her analysis of the *Discussion Platforms* (p. 69), a work that refers to extremely specific ideas about how planning and speculation might find form in a consensus environment, is breathtaking. The potential narratives that she suggests "may or may not emerge" (p. 69) clearly do emerge in the books. I do not argue for compromise and negotiation as recipes for improvement; I take a strong critical position against such conditions.²⁵ So much for the work as a "demonstration of compromise" (p. 69)—it is an articulation of social conditions with an accompanying critique. The only compromise here has been Bishop's superficial reading of the work. Similarly, we know that Bourriaud's book, Tiravanija's work, and my own projects are not based on the assumption that dialogue is in and of itself democratic. But we are forced to sit through an explanation of why this wouldn't be good enough if it were true, a problem that is compounded in the new Tate publication *Installation Art*, which recycles the *October* text with the same mistakes. The call-and-response nature of the statement "But does the fact that the work of Sierra and Hirschhorn demonstrates better democracy make it better art? For many critics, the answer would be obvious: of course it does!" (p. 77) is not a serious critical statement. The misleading and partial account Tiravanija's and my work within the essay does not allow the reader or critic to come to any such conclusion. The statement that "The feel-good positions adopted by Tiravanija and Gillick are reflected in their ubiquitous presence

24. Good examples are easy to find in relation to Hirschhorn's project *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* at the Centre Culturel Suisse de Paris in 2004, which generated a great deal of angst in the Swiss press combined with complete misreadings in most of the mainstream art press. Sierra's exhibitions regularly provoke a mixture of tabloid overreaction combined with earnest attempts to extricate him from the clutches of nihilistic libertarians who tend to fail in the same way.

25. "If you are not happy with the way things are then the options are no longer clear. Ironic non-belief is an accepted stance now, so where do you look to for action? One option is to try and address the vast central area that includes bureaucracy, compromise, conciliation and so on. Not to illustrate those things but to address them" (Gillick, *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre*, p. 13).

on the international art scene” (p. 79) is surely not a comparative critical criteria when contrasting our practice with that of Hirschhorn and Sierra. It is also a flawed value judgement that is skewed by muddled and partial examples of our practice. There are no “partial identifications open to constant flux” in the work of Hirschhorn or Sierra; their work relies on a simple-minded understanding of social relations that, ironically, has been accidentally undermined and exposed by Bishop in this wayward essay.

Despite all of Bishop’s claims of good times and open-endedness in Tiravanija’s and my work, it is sobering to note the cover image of the English translation of *Relational Aesthetics*. A woman sits alone in a simply furnished room in an art center in the middle of France. The place has a free entry policy and is situated by a busy market square.²⁶ The woman sits quietly reading; no party, free food, or good times are on show. It would have been useful if Claire Bishop had done a little bit of the same before embarking on such a depressing text that leaves Bourriaud’s complex and serious book to float free from serious critique.

In Cologne during the early 1990s—well before the publication of *Relational Aesthetics*—a tension could be perceived between those artists who advocated transparency within art (Andrea Fraser, Clegg and Guttman, and others associated with Galerie Christian Nagel) and those who believed that a sequence of veils and mean-derings might be necessary to combat the chaotic ebb and flow of capitalism (Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and others associated with Galerie Esther Schipper). It is notable that those who were skeptical about the notion of transparency and a straightforward relationship between intentions and results tended to be from backgrounds where a belief in transparency was historically one imposed by the dominant culture. In her plea for a more obvious and direct exposure of an artist’s relationships with the dominant social framework, Bishop plays into the hands of those forces in the culture that would rather control and contain complexity and critique, a didactic position that has been consistently rejected by the artists of Cuban, Algerian, Irish, and Thai heritage under consideration in Bourriaud’s books. This is a group whose complex and divided family histories have taught them to become skeptical shape-shifters in relation to the dominant culture in order to retain, rather than merely represent, the notion of a critical position.

—Liam Gillick

26. The photograph documents Tiravanija’s *Untitled (One Revolution per Minute)*, Le Consortium, Dijon, in 1996.

Claire Bishop Responds:

When Liam Gillick told me he wished to write a reply to my essay, I encouraged him on the assumption that it would give further intellectual focus to the debate about relational art. It's a pity that he has used this opportunity to respond rhetorically rather than theoretically. While there are important factual corrections in his response, for which I am grateful, they do not address the theoretical basis of my argument.

To recap: my essay drew on the work of Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Santiago Sierra to mobilize a critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's claim that relational art is a politicized mode of artistic practice. It sought to find a new method for evaluating "political art"—namely, by considering the role and experience of the viewers. Steering focus away from authorial intention to take account of audience reception is appropriate given relational art's emphasis on collaboration, dialogue, and spectator activation. The essay also tried to introduce the term "viewing experience" as a way to pressure the opposition of political content versus politicized form.

To these ends my discussion of all four artists was strategic and I apologize if it offended them. Moreover—and counter to the dominant reception of this essay—my accounts of these artists do not constitute a final judgment on their practices. On more than one occasion, Hirschhorn has produced formulaic installations, while Tiravanija's "relational retrospective" at the Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam (2005) was exemplary in its intelligence and concision. Some of Sierra's gestures *do* verge on sensationalism, in contrast to which Gillick's installations that interplay different mediums (text, photography, glitter, and Plexiglas) are appealingly fugitive and enigmatic. Rather than suggesting that the only good art is political art, the essay was moving toward what I understand Rosalind Krauss to mean by "recursivity" (i.e., a structure in which some of the elements of a work produce the rules that generate the structure itself). In other words, it is not for the reference to Georges Bataille that I am interested in Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*, but for the way in which this work constructs a set of positions for the viewer whose presence activates *both* the work's ostensible references *and* addresses the conventions of experiencing socially interactive art (e.g., by foregrounding the inevitability of a disjunction between initial participants and subsequent viewers).

Much work remains to be undertaken in relation to the critical and historical status of relational practices in the 1990s. Gillick could have contributed to this discussion by contesting my argument on theoretical and methodological grounds, for example by elaborating his commitment to Deleuze. Integral to this discussion would be a consideration of how Deleuze's vitalist understanding of rhizomatic difference, freed from the limits of constituent relations between the differed, might be harnessed toward a progressive political art. Equally pressing is the current status of fiction and opacity as a politicized aesthetic for Gillick's generation (including Huyghe, Parreno, Gonzales-Foerster, and others). It is in these directions that I hope to push future debate.