What Relational Aesthetics Can Learn From 4Chan

Is it still necessary to define art by intent and context? The gallery world would have us believe this to be the case, but the internet tells a more mutable story. Contrary to the long held belief that art needs intent and context, I suggest that if we look outside of galleries, we'll find the actions, events and people that create contemporary art with or without the art world's label.

Over the past 20 years, the theory Relational Aesthetics (referred to in this essay as RA) has interpreted social exchanges as an art form. Founding theoretician Nicolas Bourriaud describes this development as "a set of artistic practices that take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" [1]. In reality, art erroneously known to typify RA's theorization hasn't strayed far from the model of the 1960's Happening, an event beholden to the conventions of the gallery and the direction of its individual creator. In her essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", Claire Bishop describes Rirkrit Tiravanija's dinners as events circumscribed in advance, using their location as a crutch to differentiate the otherwise ordinary action of eating a meal as art [2]. A better example of the theory of RA succinctly put into action can be seen in anonymous group activities on the internet, where people form relations and meaning without hierarchy.

Started in 2003, 4Chan.org is one such site, and host to 50 image posting message boards (though one board in particular, simply titled '/b/', is responsible for originating many of the memes we use to burn our free time). The site's 700,000 daily users post and comment in complete anonymity; a bathroom-stall culture generating posts that alternate between comedic brilliance, virulent hate and both combined. Typically, the content featured is a NSFW intertextual gangbang of obscure references and in-jokes where images are created, remixed, popularized and forgotten about in a matter of hours. 4Chan keeps no permanent record of itself, making an in the moment experience the allure of participation. For all of the memes that have leaked into our inbox from it, 4Chan maintains a language, ethics and set of activities that would be incomprehensible to the unfamiliar viewer. Induction to /b/'s world is not fortified and understanding it merely requires Google searching its litany of acronymated terms or lurking regularly enough to find out for yourself.

"It is up to us as beholders of art to bring [unforeseen associations] to light, […] to judge artworks in terms of the relations they produce in the specific contexts they inhabit", concludes Bourriaud in his 2001 book, *Postproduction* [3]. One of the unforeseen relationships he mentions is that of the contemporary artist and contributive internet surfer (the kind of Photoshop bandit you can find on /b/). Bourriaud understands each as methodological equals, calling them "semionauts". He uses this term to define those who create pathways through culture by reorganizing history to bring forward new ideas [4]. In a digital environment equally defined by information categorizing and shopping, a case for surfing-as-art neatly falls between two historical precedents: Duchamp's specification-as-art and 1980's artists' (such as Jeff Koons, Sherrie Levine, or Haim Steinbach) interest in consumption-as-art. Surfing-as-art and RA both enact Peter Bürger's description of the avant-garde's intention to merge everyday life with the aesthetic realm.

Marcin Ramocki's essay "Surfing Clubs: organized notes and comments" describes the rapid conversations on group posting websites using jpgs, gifs, video, links, and text as a material:

> The older the club the more convoluted the semiotics of communication between surfers becomes. This communication entails posting organized content by a challenger, and a decoding of it by other participants, who respond with a posting where both syntagms and paradigms of the challenge post are identified and playfully manipulated. [5]

The medium, practice and logic of surf clubs outlined in Ramocki's essay matches 4Chan's /b/ message board identically, though the circumstances are obviously different. While /b/ anonymously concerns itself with people and events popularized on the internet, the individuals who manage surf clubs have social and professional connections to the art world, making their primary point of reference art historical. Reference should not be the sole criteria for understanding surfing-as-art, however. Ramocki, like Bourriaud, premises his belief in surfing-as-art not on the type of allusions made in content, but on the production method of a post and its network environment. Both describe this environment as continuously active, altering or re-contextualizing information and making it public with hope for further use by peers.

With this condition in mind, it's fair to call /b/ a massive surf club whose conceptual language is determined by those without connections to the art world or the need for validation from it. As artist and blogger Eryk Salvaggio puts it, "The net can't handle the pretense of art, or anything that seems manufactured, because it has a keen bullshit mechanism." [6] Though /b/ doesn't need us, contemporary art does need a dose of /b/'s refined understanding of actively anonymous group creation for us to advance the "bullshit" we cherish.

The notion of ongoing use in surf clubs is also fundamental to RA's attempt to create an art that takes place through the continuous social interactions participants have within an environment. Ramocki describes surf clubs as more than a dump site for disparate images, but as a location where highly specific visual languages are formed and conversed in. This corresponds with Bourriaud's description of the future of Relational art:

> artists intuitive relationship with art history is now going beyond what we call "the art of appropriation," which naturally infers an ideology of ownership, and moving toward a culture of use of forms, a culture of constant activity of signs based on a collective ideal: sharing. [7]

From this quote we can draw another relationship: /b/ and other surf clubs are digital examples of Relational Aesthetics, art forms that rely on social interaction and feedback to take place. But before /b/ can totally fall under the hood of RA, there is one last hurdle in aligning it with Bourriaud's theory. The book *Relational Aesthetics* reflected Bourriaud's distrust for technology, a feeling so deep he even criticized automatic

public toilets as instruments that distance the public from itself. Bourriaud saw the 1990's generation's drive to initiate an art consisting of intimate human relations as a reaction to the disembodying effects of the digital age.

These theories are now out of date. Understanding our only 'real' relations as those that occur through physical encounters becomes arbitrary when considering the behavioral and situational norms each physical encounter presents. Each of these norms acts as an intermediary between others and ourselves (though some would argue these norms do not regulate, but *are* our personalities). Like the digital world, physical interaction is full of socially bound interfaces, operating methods that determine the substance of relationships. As any millennial can attest, the idea that there is an in-person 'real' version of you that comprises your full identity and an online personage that bears no impact on your 'real' self, isn't an accurate description of contemporary life. The inclusion of digital sites of interaction as a development of Relational Aesthetics is an idea not so strange considering the method's practitioners' past interest in the economics of mass exchange, intermediary points of being during travel and the collision of global cultures.

An expansion into the digital world could also help clarify RA in practice; it is a theory with an open disdain for art's commodification, though is often exhibited within the shelter of an art institution. This discrepancy was best articulated, oddly enough, by dealer Gavin Brown, sharply saying in an interview with the BBC:

> Don't you think that if you wanted to look at the possibilities of an art that's theoretical horizons encompass the realm of human interactions in a social context, wouldn't you want to just go out and meet people and have a good life? I mean, to me it seems as though a lot of this work is made by people who are scared to live life in the first place – incredibly unradical people [8] who play a game of a radical life in the safe confines of some Kunsthalle or other museum in Germany or France. [9]

Despite Bourriaud's interest in collaborative art making, his theory's purest realization has been put on hold by institutions that must place emphasis on individual creators to maintain their financial well-being. While inside of a Liam Gillick exhibit, have you ever forgot that you were attending a Liam Gillick exhibit? I haven't. Ending the viewer/creator dichotomy requires no less than the end of the art-star system and a participation format that makes room for the errors inherent in participants'

free will. In his essay "Postchronist Manifestation", Dominick Chen states: "as long as there exists an asymmetry (or distance) between producer and receiver, the modality of cultural production would inevitably lead back to a religious power structure." [10]

An art of Relational Aesthetics "far from the classical mythology of the solitary effort" [11] would be anonymously produced and give all participants the greatest degree of choice possible when determining the course of their own experience. Here we arrive again at 4Chan.

In addition to the constantly evolving visual and textual language on 4Chan's message boards, there is another /b/ activity that exemplifies group production in line with RA's theory. These activities are called 'raids' – projects where a person or institution is chosen and a mass of anonymous people contribute to bringing on the manipulation of its digital existence.

While a surf club may screen capture and edit material in Photoshop to post to their board, /b/'s raids are concerned with bringing on an evolving change in the source itself, not a visualized hypothetical. Surf-clubs have a Relational structure of communication among members, but they still maintain the individual creation of static art within a designated space. In contrast, raids are a breach of boundaries – a way of altering the work's 'real life'. William S. Burroughs' proposition that art manifest itself ("What if a painting of a bomb exploded in a gallery?") is fitting for raids [12]. These site-specific alterations may take place through cracking passwords, using the open editing features on a website like Wikipedia, or hacking. Sometimes they even take place in person.

Raids have no leaders and the course of their action is decided by the collective will(s) of all participants. Without a direct chain of command, a raid is an event constantly in flux. They may end before they even start or begin with one plan of action and later morph into many splintering reactions. A raid's anti-hierarchical fragmentation is similar to the antagonism Claire Bishop describes in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics". Separate from the temporary microtopias attempted by some RA artists, Bishop calls the social works of art that reveal natural oppositions between participants an example of relational antagonism. She explains that this art making is a way of "exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of harmony." [13]

Antagonism is a byproduct of free choice and speech – an inefficient but necessary way of relating if a project wishes to remain as open as possible. 4Chan users tend to value personal liberty above all, making the prime targets of their raids people or companies who engage in censorship or moral zealotry [14]. Disgust for authority is so engrained in /b/'s culture

of anonymity that users who attempt to demand raids for their own personal gain have became the target of backlash attacks themselves. While some group interventions are petty, others are thought provoking and intelligently executed, like 2009's mARBLECAKEALSOTHEGAME raid, which is /b/'s finest work yet.

When TIME Magazine offered 4Chan's founder, m00t, as a candidate for 2009's 100 Most Influential People of the Year online readership poll, /b/ wasted no time launching an attack to propel him to the top spot. The resulting campaign included likely thousands of participants' manual labor, the creation and dispersion of sophisticated ballot-stuffing software programs and several strategic changes [15] in online manipulation methods from March to April of 2009. m00t not only took first place, but all of the top 21 people listed in the poll were intentionally ordered in such a way that their first names spelled out a secret message: 'mARBLE CAKE ALSO THE GAME'[16]. 'Marble cake' is alternately described as the name of the chat room where the anti-Scientology raid Project Chanology was born, or as an unsanitary sex act. 'The game' is an inside joke that requires you to not utter or think of it to be able to win. You mostly likely just lost the game.

The mARBLE CAKE raid was a reflexive commentary on and literal revision of whom the public thought they voted to be the most powerful that year. The ranked influence of the names listed in the top 21 become subservient to the order of /b/'s encrypted message. This echoes the commonly launched criticism of TIME's yearly "Influential" issue that many of the people included are merely entertaining figureheads or patsies who act at the behest of even more powerful, discrete interests. In addition to this, the raid is a work of Relational Aesthetics. Just as the empty bottles left over from Rirkrit Tiravanija's meals are later used as sculptures, the resulting alteration of TIME's poll became a digital monument to /b/'s successfully group-orchestrated intervention. What we witness by looking at the mARBLE CAKE raid is the result of a group of computer programmers who used their knowledge to make a mockery of a flawed media structure without retaining individual credit for themselves. With this equally creditless result, I'm reminded of the symmetrical creativity Dominick Chen calls for in his essay "Postchronist Manifestation". Chen situates Relational Aesthetics as the second to most current form of art making in history. The newest, he claims, is as-of-yet unmade, though differs from RA in that it is created and interpreted collectively without hierarchy. This 'new' form of art does not exist inside of traditional institutions and confronts the conditions of its participants' lives within their own environment.

What Chen describes is in fact Relational Aesthetics as ideally theorized by Bourriaud, highlighting the contradiction between the reality of RA's art-star-filled, institutionally reified present incarnation and the hope for an emancipatory future inherent in RA's theory. Chen calls this 'new' form of art 'X' but he might as well have named it /b/.

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[1] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Press Du Reel, France 1998, p. 113.

[2] Clare Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", in *October 110*, Fall 2004, p. 69.

[3] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas and Sternberg, New York 2002, p. 94.

[4] Ibid., p. 18

[5] Marcin Ramocki, "Surf Clubs: organized notes and comments", Self published, May 27, 2008, p. 5.

[6] Comment by Eryk Salvaggio on Rhizome.org discussion board, May 12, 2008. Online at www.rhizome.org/discuss/view/37290.

[7] Bourriaud 2002, p. 4.

[8] It should be mentioned that his gallery, Gavin Brown Enterprise represents several Relational artists, calling into question whether this answer was hypocritically sincere, ironic or Sophist.

[9] BBC News, "*Relational Art: Is it an Ism?",* 2004. www.ubu.com/film/relational.html.

[10] Dominick Chen, "Postchronist Manifestation", in Geert Lovink, Sabine Neiderer (Eds.), *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to Youtube*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam 2008, p. 74.

[11] Bourriaud 2002, p. 10.

[12] William S. Burroughs, "The Fall of Art", in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*, Arcade Publishing, 1993, p. 62.

[13] Bishop 2004, p. 79.

[14] Julian Dibbell describes 4Chan's ethos as "radically authorless, furiously remixed and compulsively serious" while imagining their antithesis as "a strictly disciplined, hierarchical organization founded on the exact reproduction of relentlessly earnest, fiercely copyright-protected words". In Julian Dibbell, "The Assclown Offensive: How to Enrage the Church of Scientology", in Wired, September 21, 2009.

Online at www.wired.com/culture/culturereviews/magazine/17-10/mf_chanology?currentPage=all.

[15] Because the poll took account of both the number of votes and the average rating of influence (a number up to 100 at best), the ballot stuffing software distributed among participants needed to take use complicated algorithms to insure each of the 21 names would stay high or low enough on the list for the mARBLE CAKE message to be spelled properly. As the raid continued, TIME caught on to these attempts and upped their security measures. Throughout the month the mARBLECAKEALSOTHEGAME message became illegible many times, forcing raiders to adopt new methods to combat Captcha Codes and time restrictions. As the amount of manual labor increased, many lost interest in the project and moved on. Participants came and went all throughout the raid – free choice includes the possibility of refusal.