

Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics.  
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Art of the 1990s

Participation and transitivity (Aktivierung des Betrachters)

A metal gondola encloses a gas ring that is lit, keeping a large bowl of water on the boil. Camping gear is scattered around the gondola in no particular order. Stacked against the wall are cardboard boxes, most of them open, containing dehydrated Chinese soups which visitors are free to add the boiling water to and eat.

This piece, by **Rirkrit Tiravanija**, produced for the Aperto 93 at the Venice Biennial, remains around the edge of any definition: is it a sculpture? an installation? a performance? an example of social activism? In the last few years, pieces such as this have increased considerably. In international exhibitions we have seen a growing number of stands offering a range of services, works proposing a precise contract to viewers, and more or less tangible models of sociability. Spectator "participation", theorized 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 is 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

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vehicles. On the other hand, the emergence of new technologies, like the Internet and multimedia systems, mints to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object. The "society of the spectacle" is thus followed by the society of extras, where everyone finds the illusion of an interactive democracy in more or less truncated channels of communication...

Transitivity is as old as the hills. It is a tangible property of the artwork. Without it, the work is nothing other than a dead object, crushed by contemplation. Delacroix wrote in his diary that a successful picture temporarily "condensed" an emotion that it was the duty of the beholder's eye to bring to life and develop. This idea of transitivity introduces into the aesthetic arena that formal disorder which is inherent to dialogue. It denies the existence of any specific "place of art", in favour of a forever unfinished discursiveness, and a never recaptured desire for dissemination. It is against this closed conception of artistic practice, incidentally, that Jean-Luc Collard rebelled against when he explained that *it takes two to make an image*. This proposition may well seem to borrow Duchamp's, putting forward the notion that *it's the beholder who makes pictures*, but it actually takes things a step further by postulating dialogue as the actual origin of the image-making process. At the outset of this,

negotiations have to be undertaken, and the Other presupposed... Any artwork might thus be defined as a relational object, like the geometric place of a negotiation with countless correspondents and recipients. It seems possible, in our view, to describe the specific nature of present-day art with the help of the concept of creating relations outside the field of art (in contrast to relations inside it, offering it its socio-economic underlay): relations between individuals and groups, between the artist and the world, and, by way of transitivity, between the beholder and the world. Pierre Bourdieu regards the art world as a "*space of objective relations between positions*", in other words, a microcosm denned by Bower plays and  
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struggles whereby producers strive to "preserve or transform it"! Like any other social arena, the art world is essentially relational, insofar as it presents a "*system of deferential positions*" through which it can be read. There are many ways of stating this "relational" reading. As part of their networking works, the Ramo Nash Club (Devautour collection artists) thus suggests that "*art is an extremely cc-operative system. The dense network of interconnections between members means that everything that happens in it will possibly be a function of all members*". Which gives them a chance to assert "*it's art that makes art, not artists*". These latter are thus mere unwitting instruments in the service of laws that exceed them, like Napoleon or Alexander the Great in Tolstoy's Theory of History... I don't go along with this cyber-deterministic position, for if the inner structure of the all world actually outlines a limited set of "Possible", this structure relies on a second order of external relations, producing and legitimizing the order of internal relations. In a word, the "Art" network is porous, and it is the relations of this network with all the areas of production that determines its development. It would be possible, furthermore, to write a history of art that is the history of this production of relations with the worlds by naively raising the issue of the nature of the external relations "invented" by artworks. To give a broad historical picture, let us say that artworks were first situated in a transcendent world, within which art aimed at introducing ways of communicating with the deity. It acted as an interface between human society and the invisible forces governing its movements, alongside a nature that represented the model order. An understanding of this order made it possible to draw closer to divine designs. Art gradually abandoned this goal, and explored the relations existing between Man and the world. This new, relational, dialectical order developed from the Renaissance on, a period that attached great importance to the physical situation of the human being in his world, even if this world was still ruled by the divine figure, with the help of new visual tools such as Alberti's perspective, anatomical realism, and Leonardo da Vinci's "Sfumato". This artwork's pulse was not  
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radically challenged until the arrival of Cubism which attempted to analyse our visual links with the world by way of the most nondescript

everyday objects and features (the corner of a table, pipes and guitars, based on a mental realism that reinstated the moving mechanisms of our acquaintance (Umgang) with the object.

The relational arena opened up by the Italian Renaissance was thus gradually applied to more and more limited objects. The question: "What is our relationship to the physical world?" had a bearing (Einfluss), first and foremost, on the entirety of the real, then on limited parts of this same reality. Needless to say, this is in no way a linear progression. One finds painters like Seurat, the rigorous analyst of our ocular ways of perception, living at the same time as someone like Odilon Redon, who tried to see through our relations with the invisible. Essentially, though, the history of art can be read like the history of successive external relational fields, propped up by practices determined by the internal development of these fields. It is the history of the production of relations with the world, as publicised by a class of objects and specific practices.

Today, this history seems to have taken a new turn. 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, as illustrated by artistic activities that have been in progress since the early 1990s. So 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. This specific production determines not only an ideological and practical arena, but new formal fields as well. By this, I mean that over and above the relational character intrinsic to the artwork, the figures of reference of the sphere of human relations have now become fully-fledged (vollwertige) artistic "forms". Meetings, encounters (Begegnungen), events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be looked at as such,

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with pictures and sculptures regarded here merely as specific cases of a production of forms with something other than a simple esthetic consumption in mind.

## **Typology**

### *Connections and meetings*

Pictures and sculptures are characterised, by their symbolic availability. Beyond obvious material impossibilities (museum closing times, geographical remoteness), an artwork can be seen at any time. It is there before our eyes, offered to the curiosity of a theoretically universal public. Now, contemporary art is often marked by non-availability, by being viewable only at a specific time. The example of performance is the most classic of all. Once the performance is over, all that remains is documentation that should not be confused with the work itself. This type of activity presupposes a contract with the viewer, an "arrangement" whose

clauses have tended to become diversified since the 1960s. The artwork is thus no longer presented to be consumed within a "monumental" time frame and open for a universal public; rather, it elapses within a factual time, for an audience summoned (eingeladen) by the artist. In a nutshell, the work prompts meetings and invites appointments, managing its own temporal structure. Meetings with a public are not necessarily involved. Marcel Duchamp, for example, invented his "Rendez-vous d'art" by arbitrarily ordaining that, at a certain time of the day, the first object within his reach would be transformed into a readymade. Others have summoned the public to observe a specific phenomenon, the way Robert Barry announced that at "*a certain moment during the morning of the 5th of March 1969, half a cubic meter of helium was released into the atmosphere*" by him. The spectator is thus prompted to move in order to observe a work, which only exists as an artwork by virtue of this observation. In January 1970, Christian Boltanski sent a few acquaintances (Bekanntnen) an SOS letter that

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was sufficiently vague in its content to be a standard letter, like On Kawara's telegrams informing their addressees, likewise from 1970 onwards, that he was "still alive". Today, the form of the visiting card (used by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick and Jeremy Deller) and the address book (some of Karen Kilimnik's drawings), the growing importance of the opening as part of the exhibition programme (Parreno, Joseph, Tirvanija, Huyghe), together with the originality endeavour made in the production of invitations (leftover from mail-art), illustrate the importance of this "rendez-vous" represented by the artistic arena, and which forms its relational dimension.

#### *Conviviality and encounters (Geselligkeit und Begegnung)*

A work may operate like a relational device containing a certain degree of randomness, or a machine provoking and managing individual and group encounters. To mention just a few examples from the past two decades, this applies to Braco Dimitrijevic's *Casual Passer-by* series (lässiger Passant), which exaggeratedly celebrate the name and face of an anonymous passer-by on an advertisement-size poster, or alongside the bust of a celebrity. In the early 1970s, Stephen Willats painstakingly mapped the relationships existing between the inhabitants of an apartment block. And Sophie Calle's work consists largely in describing her meetings with strangers. Whether she is following a passer-by, rummaging through hotel rooms after being employed as a chambermaid, or asking blind people what their definition of beauty is, she formalises, after the fact, a biographical experience which leads her to "collaborate" with the people she meets. Let us further mention, the On Kawara's *I met* series, the Food restaurant owned in 1971 by Gordon Matta-Clark, the dinners organized by Daniel Spoerry, and the ludic shop called *la cédille qui sourit* (*The Smiling Cedilla*) owned by George Brecht and Robert Filliou in Villefranche. The constitution of convivial relations has been an historical constant since the 1960s. The generation of the 1990s took up this set of issues, though it had been relieved of the

matter of the definition of art, so pivotal in the 1960s and 1970s. The  
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issue no longer resides in broadening the boundaries of art, but in experiencing art's capacities of resistance within the overall social arena. Based on one and the same family of activities, two radically different set of problems emerge: yesterday, the stress laid on relations inside the art world, within a modernist culture attaching great importance to the "new" end calling for linguistic subversion; today, the emphasis put on external relations as part of an eclectic culture where the artwork stands up to the mill of the "Society of the Spectacle". Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies, any stance that is "directly" critical of society is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that is nowadays impossible, not to say regressive. Almost thirty years ago, Felix Guattari was advocating those hands-on strategies that underpin present-day artistic practices: *"Just as I think it is illusory to aim at a step-by-step transformation of society, so I think that microscopic attempts, of the community and neighbourhood committee type, the organisation of day-nurseries in the faculty, and the like, play an absolutely crucial role"*.

Traditional critical philosophy (the Frankfurt school, in particular) now only fuels art in the form of archaic folklore, a magnificent but ineffectual toy. The subversive and critical function of contemporary art is now achieved in the invention of individual and collective vanishing lines, in those temporary and nomadic constrictions whereby the artist models and disseminates disconcerting situations. Whence the present-day craze for revisited areas of conviviality, crucibles where heterogeneous forms of sociability are worked out. For her show at the CCC in Tours, Angela Bullish set up a cafe. When a certain number of visitors sat down on the seats, these latter set off the broadcast of a piece of music by Kraftwerk (1993)... For the Restaurant exhibition in Paris, in October 1993, Georgina Starr described the anxiety she felt about "having super on her own", and wrote a text that was handed out to lone diners in the restaurant. Ben Kinmont, for his part, proposed randomly selected people that he would do their washing-up, and kept an information network

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around his works. On several occasions, Lincoln Tobier has set up a radio station in art galleries, and invited the public to a discussion then broadcast over the airwaves.

Philippe Parreno has been particularly inspired by the notion of party. His exhibition project at Le Consortium in Dijon (January 1995) consisted in "occupying two hours of time rather than square metres of space", which involved organizing a party where all the ingredients ended up producing relational forms - clusters of individuals around art objects in situation... Rirkrit Tiravanija, on the other hand, has explored the socio-professional aspect of conviviality, by including in the *Surfaces de réparation* show (Dijon, 1994) a relaxation area intended for the artists in the

exhibition, equipped in particular with a table football game and a full fridge... To wind up these convivial situations being developed as part of a "friendship" culture, let us mention the bar created by Heimo Zoftig for the exhibition *Unité*, and Franz West's *Passtücke*. But other artists are suddenly emerging in the relational fabric in a more aggressive way. Douglas Gordon's work for example, explores the "wild" dimension of this interactivity, by acting parasitically and paradoxically in the social space. So he phoned the customers in a café, and sent multiple "instructions" to selected people. The best example of untimely communication upsetting communication networks is probably Angus Fairhurst's piece, for which, with the help of airwave-pirating equipment, he linked two art galleries telephonically together. Each person at the other end of the line thought it was the other person who had called, so their exchanges would end up in an improbable misunderstanding... As creations and explorations of relational schemes, these works form relational microterritories displayed in the depth of the contemporary "socius": experiences publicized by surface-objects (Liam Gillick's boards, Pierre Huyghe's posters made in the street, and Eric Duyckaerts' video-lectures), or else given over to immediate experience (Andrea Fraser's exhibition tours).

#### Collaborations and contracts

Those artists proposing as artworks:

a/ moments of sociability

b/ objects producing sociability,

also sometimes use a relational context defined in advance so as to extract production principles from it. The exploration of relations existing between, for instance, the artist and his/her gallery owner may determine forms and a project. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, whose work deals with the relations which link lived life with its media, images, spaces and objects, has thus devoted several exhibitions to the biographies of her gallery owners. *Bienvenue à ce que vous croyez voir (welcome to What You Think You're Seeing)* (1988) included photographic documentation about Gabrielle Maubrie, and *The Daughter of a Taoist* (1992) used a set inspired by animism to mix Esther Schipper's childhood memories with objects formally organised according to their evocative potential and their colour range (here, a predominant red). Gonzalez-Foerster thus explores the unspoken contract that binds the gallery owner to "his/her" artist, the former being an integral part of the other's personal history, and vice versa. It goes without saying that those fragmented biographies, where the main factors are provided in the form of "hints" and "clues" by the person commissioning the work, conjure up the portrait tradition, when the commission formed the social bond at the root of artistic representation. Maurizio Cattelan has also worked directly on the physical person of his gallery owners: by designing a phallic rabbit costume for Emmanuel Perrotin, which he had to wear throughout the exhibition, and by earmarking clothes for Stefano Basilica creating the illusion that he was carrying gallery

owner Ileana Sonnabend on his shoulders... In a more circuitous way, Sam Samore asks gallery owners to take photographs which he then selects and reframe. But this artis/curator pairing, which is an intrinsic part of the institution, is just the literal aspect of inter-human relations likely to define an artistic production. Artists take things further, by working with spectacle figures; whence Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's work with the actress Maria de Medeiros (1990); the series of public activities organised by Philippe Parreno for the imitator Yves Lecoq, through which it was his intent to refashion, from within, the image of a television person (*Un homme public*, Marseille, Dijon', Ghent 1994-1995).

Noritoshi Hirakawa, for his part, produces forms based on set up meetings. So for his show at the Pierre Huber Galley in Geneva (1994) he published a small ad to recruit a girl who would agree to travel with him in Greece, a visit that would be the material for the show. The images he exhibits are always the outcome of a specific contract drawn up with his model, who is not necessarily visible in the photos.