

## ESSAY

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## Determination and use of the term *relational art*

In 2002 the French publisher [Les presses du réel](#) published the English version of a summary of essays called *Relational Aesthetics* written by Nicolas Bourriaud. Since then, the term *Relational Art* seems to be integrated into the popular vocabulary of artistic discourses. In fact Nicolas Bourriaud is using the term *relational (art)* to describe the artistic activities in 1990's. It referred specifically to certain artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Rirkrit Tiravanika, Carsten Hoeller, Liam Gillick among others.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the principles of *relational art* Bourriaud gives an example on the work of *hide and seek* by Gonzales Torres:

*"[...] I saw visitors grabbing as many candies as their hands and pockets could hold: In doing so they were referred to their social behaviour, their fetishism and their cumulative concept of the world [...] while others did not dare, or waited for the person next to them to filch a candy, before doing likewise."*<sup>2</sup>

Bourriaud interprets Torres's work as a visualization of *"[...] our relationship to authority and the way museum guards use their power, our sense of moderation and the nature of our relationship to the work of art."*<sup>3</sup>

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Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* ([Les presses du réel](#), 2002), pp.36, 47 - 48, 51 and Claire Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (CUNY Academic Works, 2004), pp. 54-55

2 Bourriaud, p.56

3 Ibid., p.57

In conclusion the author proposes that:

*“The first question we should ask ourselves when looking at a work of art is: Does it give me a chance to exist in front of it, or, on the contrary, does it deny me as a subject [...]?”*<sup>4</sup>

What, as a result, is the subject of a *relational* work of art when the Duchamp’s *Coefficient of Art*<sup>5</sup> is exposed and the aesthetics of the physical work of art is no longer relevant? Torres, for instance, turns his art object (i.e. piles of candies) into a series of time bound activities (beholders stealing candies) and thus creates a *social interstice*<sup>6</sup> within the art space by allowing the exhibition visitors to interact with those. Hence the subject of *relational* art is the sphere of inter-human relations and it uses methods of social exchanges to provide an interactive aesthetic experience for the beholders to link individuals and group of peoples.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Ibid., p.57

5 Ibid., pp. 41, 63: Which here is the relation between the unexpressed but intended intention of an art work to the beholder.

6 Ibid., p. 16

7 Ibid., p. 43

## **Relational (art) as new approach of art**

In the book *Relational Aesthetics* the author constructs a fundamental shift of the *Western World* caused by the Influence of new technologies, especially the accessibility of the internet. He focuses on the social structure of the *western* society and he claims that interpersonal space and communication between people is increasingly being replaced by machines.<sup>8</sup>

*“The general mechanisation [...] reduces the relational space. Just a few years ago [...] The automatic cash machine has become the transit model for the most elementary of social functions, [...] these machines carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, please and squabbling.”*<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore he claims that the loss of relational space is caused by capitalism.<sup>10</sup> In this context he sets up a connection between art (art history) and *Marxist Philosophy*. The equation of art with social exchange is one of the most essential assumptions of Bourriaud<sup>11</sup> and the conclusion that one can use art as well as an instrument to produce more subjectivity and to claim political territory (Arena of exchange<sup>12</sup>) becomes obvious. The resulting discrepancy between Bourriaud's ideal world view and the political reality he experiences overlaps in his theories suggesting a political direction.

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8 Ibid., pp. 17, 68, 71

9 Ibid., p.17

10 Ibid., pp. 84 - 85

11 Ibid., p. 41

12 Ibid., p. 17

*“The widespread failure of modernity can be found here through the way inter-human relations are turned into products, along with impoverishment of political alternatives, and the devaluation of work as a non-economic value [...].”*<sup>13</sup>

Bourriaud believes that there is a possibility in social change with a radical impact aesthetically, culturally and politically only if there is a shift from the ‘private symbolic space’ to the core of ‘human interactions’.<sup>14</sup> Relational art should take this into account in terms of grounding its foundations in a solid theoretical basis. What is defined as its ultimate goal is the reduction of the ‘mechanical share’ within us alongside with the destruction of any pre-existing perceptions.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Ibid., p. 84

14 Ibid., p.16

15 Ibid., p.80

## ***Relational art as it seems in the present time***

One can assume that *relational Art* starts where modernism has failed. Bourriaud offers a spatiotemporal distinction between past and present revealing concurrently the necessity of a transition from the internal to the external:

“[...] yesterday, the stress laid on relations inside the art world, within modernist culture attaching great importance to the “new” [...]; today, the emphasis put on external relations as part of an eclectic culture where the art work stands up to the mill of the ‘Society of the Spectacle’”.<sup>16</sup>

Nowadays there are plenty of different terms to portray *relational art*. For instance, it is usually described as *Social Engaged Art* or as *Collaborative Art* in the U.K., while in the USA people call it *Social Practice*. Other versions around the globe are: *Interventionalist Art*, *Community-based Art*, *Experimental Communities*, *Dialogic Art*, *Literal Art*, *Contextual Art*, *Participatory* and *Useful Art*.<sup>17</sup>

Still, do these terms give prominence to what is ‘relational’ in the context of ‘relational’ art? The art historian Claire Bishop gives us a plausible overview. Bishop uses the more consensual term *Participatory Art* (i.e. direct actions, symbolic gestures, consciousness raising performances, media interventions, creation of new communities among other practices) instead of using the term

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.31

<sup>17</sup> Claire Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?* (The Cooper Union School of Art, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdKniMT46tg&t=186s>, [accessed 12 May 2018]

*relational art* because the current forms of contemporary *relational art* all have participation as a key-strategy in common.<sup>18</sup>

According to Bishop there is a history of *Participatory Art* since the beginning of the 20th Century, but each participative art movement had different forms and goals depending on the historical moment they emerged. In her opinion the tensions between artistic and social critiques of capitalism appeared historically at certain moments. She concludes that the comeback of *Participatory Art* is almost a symptom of social transition and a political clash:

*“It tends to occur at moments of political transition and upheaval in the years leading to Italian fascism, [...] the widespread that led to 1968 [...]”*<sup>19</sup>

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18 Claire Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?* (The Cooper Union School of Art, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdKniMT46tg&t=186s>, [accessed 12 May 2018], 14min

19 Claire Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?* (The Cooper Union School of Art, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdKniMT46tg&t=186s>, [accessed 12 May 2018], 41.20min

## Afterword - *Relationality* has come to the fore in recent art

Bishop believes that since the collapse of communism in 1989 and the following absence of a political left alternative we are living in a time of political change. According to her the state of the *western world* has the emergency of a *post political consensus* <sup>20</sup> and an issue by the *marketization* of art and education.<sup>21</sup> As Bishop puts it:

*"[...] even though participatory artists invariably stake a stand against neoliberal capitalism, the values they impute to their work are understood formally in terms of opposing individualism [...], without recognizing that so many other aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms [...]."* <sup>22</sup>

Bishop asserts that even contemporary *Participatory Art* itself has become a victim of the *Spectacle Culture* in the field of art. On the one hand, it has become very difficult to find attention as an artist. While on the other hand, many artists have integrated themselves perfectly in a system which they actually desire to change.

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20 Wikipedia, *Post-Politics*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-politics#Post-ideological\\_consensus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-politics#Post-ideological_consensus) [accessed: 12 May 2018]

21 Claire Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?* (The Cooper Union School of Art, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdKniMT46tg&t=186s>, [accessed 12 May 2018], 41.20min

22 Claire Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?* (The Cooper Union School of Art, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdKniMT46tg&t=186s>, [accessed 12 May 2018], 40.30 min



*“Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it.”*<sup>23</sup>

I am inclined to the critical perspectives Claire Bishop provides in her lecture *Participation and Spectacle* for I strongly believe that *relational* art has something utopian about it. Nevertheless, I have sympathies for the political undertone of *relational* art. Our age is marked by digitalization and much of our communication has moved into the digitalised sphere of Internet. In my opinion, as it is a usual phenomenon for art to emerge through social imperatives, the times of the 90’s were crying out for social interactions possibly sensing the fear of future technology and the rise of media. Indeed, starting from the 90’s generation and onwards, people are increasingly stepping away of what is interpersonal communication and social interaction when they can do it remotely through a digital screen. In addition, formal as well as highly personal information get usually exchanged by voicemails and chats.

Social education through reading the news is increasingly taking place on social media rather than on television and in newspapers. This can be seen as somewhat problematic as the ‘news’ presented to us is not prove in itself. Globalization has brought varying cultures together ultimately making the world more connected and seemingly smaller. This puts social tolerance to the test. In order to avoid social conflicts, global citizens are asked to have a qualitative social exchange explaining why *relationality* has come to the fore in recent art. I suppose it is in line with our *zeitgeist*. Caused by social media, the art market and the system propagates an ideology of quantity but not quality and conditions young artists to like seeing

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23 Claire Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?* (The Cooper Union School of Art, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdKniMT46tg&t=186s>, [accessed 12 May 2018], 43.45 min

themselves on screens. This especially refers to performance artists who seem to see the necessity (consciously or unconsciously) to film and advertise themselves like products on a market. Digitalization and social networking accelerate these processes. On the other hand, there is definitely an impact on the society made by several artists of this generation, which I would not put in question.

With respect to their work and without doubting their credibility, we could be driven by those artists who are interested in creating experiences and places through "participation" and might get a chance into being offered a society with the possibilities of self-reflection and self-questioning.

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