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Publisher Routledge

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Third Text

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713448411>

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Online Publication Date: 01 May 2007

To cite this Article Downey, Anthony(2007)'Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics',Third Text,21:3,267 – 275

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09528820701360534

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820701360534>

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Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics

Anthony Downey

- 1 The subject of aesthetics and art criticism has been explored in Suzanne Perling Hudson's 'Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism', *October*, no 104, 2003, pp 115–30. More recently, *Art Monthly* undertook a lengthy discussion of aesthetics throughout 2004 and early 2005. See J J Charlesworth's 'Art and Beauty', *Art Monthly*, no 279, 2004. For a critique of Charlesworth, see Mark Wilsher, 'Judgement Call', *Art Monthly*, no 280, 2004. For a critique of both Charlesworth and Wilsher, see Sarah James's insightful overview, 'The Ethics of Aesthetics', *Art Monthly*, no 284, 2005. Elsewhere, as noted by James, the subject of aesthetics has produced a number of more far-reaching debates, including Dave Beech and John Roberts's *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, London, 2002; and Isobel Armstrong's *Radical Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000. In the context of philosophical enquiry, the recent translation of Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London, 2004, has further

The aesthetic criteria used to interpret art as a practice have changed radically since the 1960s. To note as much is to observe a truism: the idea (or should that be *the* ideal) of a universalist aesthetic point of reference, or even the notion of aesthetics as a nominal interpretive baseline, has been discursively displaced by identitarian, theoretical, political, economic, ethical and social interventions. And yet aesthetics as a topic, far from fading into a minor role, has become something of a notional cornerstone in recent discussions about contemporary art.¹ Putting to one side the pre-eminence of performance and installation art in debates about aesthetic form, one of the more prominent statements on the matter has come from Nicolas Bourriaud's influential volume *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), a book that has attracted much by way of both criticism and support.² Stemming from essays published from 1995 onwards in *Documents sur l'art* – a journal jointly edited by Bourriaud and Eric Troncy – and in part from the 1996 show 'Traffic', curated by Bourriaud for CAPC Bordeaux, *Relational Aesthetics* was first published in France in 1998 before being published in English in 2002.³ For a relatively short series of essays the book has attracted a considerable amount of interest; a consequence, no doubt, of Bourriaud's rather grand claim that he has not only isolated a new aesthetic 'movement' in contemporary art (albeit one that is formally diverse and based on loose rather than close associations), but also a critical language within which to discuss this development.

In a broad sense, relational art, for Bourriaud, engages in a form of practicable social interactiveness that co-opts collaboration, participation, intervention, research-led activities and community-based projects into both the form and content of the work. The emergence of these new formal strategies implies, in turn, that the 'criteria of aesthetic judgment' be yet again rearticulated.⁴ More specifically, relational art represents a branch of artistic practice that is largely concerned with producing and reflecting upon the interrelations *between* people and the extent to which such relations – or communicative acts – need to be considered as an aesthetic form. Focusing on the modes of sociability and socialisation

developed enquiry into the apparent opposition to be had between the terms 'politics' and 'aesthetics', whilst Alain Badiou's *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005, has promisingly sought to subject philosophy, through the discourse of aesthetics, to the 'truth-event' of art itself. (Briefly, the 'inaesthetic' is defined by Badiou as 'a relation of philosophy to art which, maintaining that art is itself a producer of truths, makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy'. Badiou, op cit, p 10.)

- 2 One of the more extended critiques of Bourriaud has been proposed by Claire Bishop in her essay 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, no 110, 2004, pp 51–80. A defence of, in part, *Relational Aesthetics* and his own work in the context of Bishop's criticism of it was subsequently published by Liam Gillick. See Liam Gillick, 'Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"', *October*, no 115, 2006.
- 3 The artists included in 'Traffic' were Vanessa Beecroft, Henry Bond, Angela Bulloch, Jes Brinch, Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, Maurizio Cattelan, Andrea Clavdetscher, Eric Schumacher, Honore D'O', Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Jens Haaning, Lothar Hempel, Christine Hill, Noritoshi Hirakawa, Carsten Holler, Pierre Huyghe, Peter Land, Miltos Manetas, Gabriel Orozco, Jorge Pardo, Philippe Parreno, Jason Rhoades, Christopher Sperandio, Simon Grennan, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Xavier Veilhan, Gillian Wearing, and Kenji Yanobe. The majority of the artists in 'Traffic' make appearances, some with regularity, throughout *Relational Aesthetics*.

that issue forth from relational art practices, Bourriaud put forward *Relational Aesthetics* (RA) not so much as a 'theory of art [but as] a theory of form'; or, more precisely, a theory of formations (RA 19). The artwork in this discourse is 'presented as a *social interstice* within which ... new "life possibilities" appear to be possible' (RA 45). From the outset, it would appear that it is not so much *what is said* that interests Bourriaud in the work he promotes, as *how it is said* – and it is precisely this emphasis on formal, functional and relational concerns that signifies what is both promising and yet problematic in his thesis. It is with such points in mind that the following discussion will examine how Bourriaud advances a politics of relational aesthetics and, latterly, its conceptual ramifications on a broader politics of contemporary aesthetics and artistic practices. By way of discussing these ideas, I will explicate his thesis before noting the issues that emanate from it, including the impact of contemporary curatorial practice on the politics of aesthetics (not forgetting that Bourriaud is first and foremost a curator), the distinction made between institutional and public space, historical precursors to relational art practices and, finally, the critical debates that *Relational Aesthetics* has given rise to in recent discussions of aesthetics, politics and art criticism. Whereas Bourriaud expands his thesis through readings of various artists, I am more concerned here in developing a critical engagement *with* his thesis rather than *passing* critical judgement on his choice of artists. The overarching purpose of this article is to clarify the ground for a substantive discussion of the politics of aesthetics in the context of contemporary art practices and art criticism.

Drawing on, *inter alia*, the work of the French film critic Serge Daney and, in passing, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Bourriaud posits the form of relational aesthetics as an exercise in 'showing': 'When an artist shows us something he uses a transitive ethic which places his work between the "look-at-me" and the "look-at-that"' (RA 24). If we follow through this idea of causal transitivity (whereby an action or intention is carried from the subject to the object), then 'looking at' elides the apparently egotistical demand to 'look at me' and produces an imperative that we 'look at that'. Conceptualised as a reciprocal, if not strictly speaking interrogative gesture, the form of relational art – and the formative structures it engenders – effectively 'invent[s] possible encounters' and 'the conditions for an exchange' (RA 23). We are left with a dialogue wherein, to cite Bourriaud quoting Daney, 'all form is a face looking at me' (RA 24). Aesthetic practice, in this instant, requires a reply of sorts – or, at the very least, a reaction. In focusing on 'relations of exchange', social interplay and inter-subjective communication, relational art practices – in their exhibitionary method – also provide nodal points for reflection on their socially transitive potential. This, for Bourriaud, is a political activity in so far as relational art practices not only focus on the 'sphere of inter-human relations', a realm that is an endemically political sphere to begin with, but also give rise to the conditions within which unprecedented inter-human relations can be articulated. I will return to this latter point; however, for now it should be noted that relational art is not so much about artists taking up political causes per se – an act that can be seen merely to co-opt the political mileage to be had in a subject and rehearse it via art practice – as it is a vision of art reflecting and *producing* inter-subjective relations and imbricating those relations

within a sociopolitical rather than, strictly speaking, an art-related forum. From this perspective, any examination of the politics of relational aesthetics is engaged not so much in an examination of political content as it is with the politics of social formations.

For Bourriaud, the litany of artists who utilise relational art practices, and thus enhance the relational spheres within which they operate, is extensive and includes amongst others Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Pierre Huyghe. Noting precedents such as Christian Boltanski's so-called 'SOS letters' – sent out to an unsuspecting artworld in January 1970 – and from the same period On Kawara's phatic telegrams announcing to the addressee that he was still alive, Bourriaud observes the use of the visiting card in the work of Gonzalez-Foerster, Gillick and Jeremy Deller; the address book in Karen Kilimnik's drawings; and the integration of the opening night into the exhibition as a whole in the work of Parreno and Huyghe. Tiravanija's socialising gestures are also noted throughout, as are Gillick's employment of 'scaled down models of communicational structures' (RA 47). Elsewhere, and by way of partially historicising relational art practices, Bourriaud references Braco Dimitrijevic's *Casual Passer-by* series from the 1970s; Stephen Willat's mapping of the relationships between inhabitants of an apartment block; Sophie Calle's oeuvre in general; Gordon Matta-Clark's *Food* restaurant, opened in 1971; and the numerous dinners organised by Daniel Spoerri. Apart from examples of collaboration (the latter activity being a sine qua non of relational art practices), Bourriaud is also interested in the exploration of contractual obligations by artists as diverse as Alix Lambert – who managed to get married to and divorced from four different people over a six-month period – and Noritoshi Hirakawa.⁵ Gonzalez-Foerster is further cited for her work at the ARC in Paris and CAPC Bordeaux where she set up a de facto Biographical Office for individuals to relate details of their lives. The inter-human, or inter-subjective, exchanges promoted by these works is detailed by Bourriaud in terms of dialogue and it is worth noting that there is not much to actually 'look' at in relational art practices, the transitive value of the work being largely placed on the relational interplay, communications and social formations that stem from interaction with the work. Further examples of such activities include Christine Hill carrying out 'menial' tasks such as shining shoes and working at a checkout in a supermarket, and Carsten Höller's application of his scientific training to 'the invention of situations or objects which involve human behaviour' (RA 36).

Following on from an 'end of modernity' scenario, and the apparently inevitable alienation of individuals within a so-called postmodern environment, Bourriaud observes that 'through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond ... through little gestures art is like an angelic programme, a set of tasks carried out beside or beneath a real economic system, so as to patiently restitch the relational fabric' (RA 36). Importantly, the formations and inter-subjective relations emanating from relational art practices both represent and produce 'new models of sociability' (RA 28). Art, in this context, 'is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces' (RA 46). Arguing that 'present-day social contexts

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon, [1998] 2002, p 11. Hereafter referred to as RA with page number following.

5 Bourriaud specifically refers to Hirakawa's show at the Pierre Huber Gallery in Geneva (1994) where the artist recruited, through an advertisement in a newspaper, a girl who subsequently accompanied him on a trip to Greece. The documentation of the trip became the effective substance of the show.

[restrict] the possibilities of inter-human relations', Bourriaud avers that relational art practices politicise the conditions of (non)socialisation:

The general mechanisation of social functions gradually reduces the relational space ... and professional behavior patterns are modelled on the efficiency of the machines replacing them, these machines [in turn] carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling. Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue. (RA 15–16)

The industrialisation of space and time, and the (non-)relationships formed within such paradigm shifts, intimates that inter-subjective communication is now largely mediated through a succession of mute, impersonalised, automated and systematically compartmentalised interactions and modes of social exchange. The artist's 'purpose' in this realm, it would seem, is to perform the role of a quasi-social worker – an individual who glues together the intellectual breaches and communicational fallouts that underwrite contemporary interrelations.

There is a crucial causative inflection to Bourriaud's thesis that needs further detailing here in respect of the above observations: relational art practices do not necessarily mirror – although they may replicate – the conditions of the social milieu in which they exist; rather, they generate and propagate those very conditions. In a useful glossary to his book, Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as an 'aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, *produce or prompt*' (RA 112; emphasis added). This point is further complemented by the notion of a 'co-existence criterion': the idea that 'All works of art produce a model of sociability' (RA 109); however, relational art practices significantly produce '*new* models of sociability' (RA 28; emphasis added). We alight here upon a notional seam that runs throughout *Relational Aesthetics*: since the 1990s, certain artists – rather than attempting to expand the parameters of art practice and therefore reflect on what has gone before – have sought to produce and therefore promote new models of inter-subjective relations within the sociopolitical sphere.⁶ And herein lies, as Bourriaud sees it, the historical shift within, and therefore the conceptual pertinence thereof, relational art: in contrast to creating relations within the field of art, and presumably maintaining a modernist ideal of art's autonomy, 'It seems possible ... to describe the specific nature of present-day art with the help of the concept of creating relations outside the field of art...' (RA 26). When these 'models of sociability' are further considered, however, we come to the kernel of the problematic as outlined by Bourriaud himself: new (relational) art practices demand new aesthetic criteria. 'And this [relational] "arena of exchange" must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analyzing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the "world" it suggests to us, and the image of human relations reflected by it' (RA 18). However, it is precisely on the subject of the 'symbolic' value of the world that relational aesthetics proposes – alongside the implied politics of the relations formed within it – that Bourriaud's thesis is less than forthcoming and decidedly more open-ended in its conclusions.

6 Bourriaud argues that 'The ambition of artists who include their practice within the slipstream of historical modernity is to repeat neither its forms nor its claims, and even less assign to art the same functions as it... Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities [*sic*], but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real...' (RA, p 13).

Open-endedness, in relation to the thesis being progressed, is nevertheless conceivably fitting if we consider the extent to which much of the work promoted in *Relational Aesthetics* is advanced precisely because of its propensity towards a degree of open-endedness and its potential to both embrace and utilise the sociopolitical sphere within which it is produced. There is, as with much commentary on relational art practices, a distinct reliance here upon a Deleuzian conceptualisation of a rhizomatic structure that is constantly in process; an indigenous relational form that originates from the ground upwards and repeatedly follows ever-more sinuous channels of development.⁷ Despite this air of utopic, if not formal, idealism, there is a need here to discuss the practicalities of relational art: to what extent, for example, do relational art practices really operate 'beside or beneath a real economic system' and thus avoid (and radically reconstitute) the service economy that underwrites our neo-liberal world order and the relationships formed within it? This is critical if we consider the degree to which relational art is proposed as a remediative to the socially de-personalising effects of the neo-liberal, postindustrial and increasingly globalised demands of the so-called Western world. If relational art practices are indeed reflecting, or utilising, channels of inter-subjective relations, then there is a need to enquire into whether or not they are applying the already invasive practices of neo-liberalist commodification to both the so-called private realm and, subsequently, to the interstitial relational space between art institutions and their public. The question that needs addressing, in fine, is relatively straightforward: do these works expose tensions within social relations or just epitomise them? It may appear cynical to ask such a question; but there is a co-extensive point that needs to be deliberated here, one that encourages consideration of both Bourriaud's role as a curator and the present-day function of art institutions. Does relational aesthetics, in terms of its practice, originate in actual artistic activity or in the increasingly ascendant patterns of contemporary curatorial practices – practices, it should be observed, that are largely developed within the context and demands of market-led, publicly funded institutional priorities?

Whilst this is not necessarily the place to digress into an extended discussion of the preponderance or otherwise of curators in the contemporary art world (and the exact nature of their surprisingly irreproachable role), any such discussion has the concomitant effect of referring us to the institutional context within which artistic practice is currently being showcased and the contiguous de-institutionalisation of these institutions.⁸ This draws attention to the manner in which a considerable number of contemporary artists (as detailed by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*) and curators co-opt both the *socius* – a term deployed here to define a degree of companionable collaborations – and compliancy of the 'public' sphere to further their institutionally based projects. Writing in the preface to *Documenta X* in 1997, Catherine David noted the shift in how institutions were being utilised, proposing that:

Today, while we witness the (final?) dissolution of the museum and of public space into the 'society of the spectacle', the strategies that attempt to contrast institutional space with an 'outside' appear naïve or ridiculous, as do 'in situ' interventions which turn their backs not only to the

7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are prominently discussed throughout *Relational Aesthetics*. 'Unlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight.' Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol 2, trans Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p 21.

8 Alex Farquharson noted the recent coining of the term 'new institutionalism', a development within which independent curators have rearticulated the function of the museum space, especially in north central Europe. He observed that 'One of the defining traits of "new institutions" is that exhibitions no longer preside over other types of activity' and institutions become multifunctional. 'The most politicized new institutions', Farquharson continues, 'aspire to a similar condition of collective autonomy writ large. Many see their experiments as logical responses to the most pressing socio-political issues of the day: the shrinking welfare state, the erosion of the social bond, the privatization of public space, the global hegemony of neo-liberal economics and so on.' Alex Farquharson, 'Bureaux de Change', *Frieze*, no 101, 2006, pp 157 and 159.

current transformation of the Habermasian model of public space, but also to the new modes of imaginary and symbolic investment of places by contemporary subjects.⁹

The ideal of a compartmentalised or demarcated ‘public’, or for that matter ‘private’, space has been increasingly eroded by not only the demands of globalised consumerism and the commercialisation of even our innermost desires, but also curatorial practice. Relational art practices have, for better or worse, taken full advantage, if not overtly promoted, the elision between institutional and public space in a process that needs to be considered within the context of both the privatisation and institutionalisation of public and private spheres of activity. We need, in sum, to carefully delineate the extent to which such practices offer a critique (or, for Bourriaud, an alternative) to these processes or simply reflect their ubiquity. And this, somewhat depressingly, is perhaps all we can hope for in an age where the increased commodification of relationships, artistic practices, opposition and the sphere of political action effectively fragments and absorbs the transitive power of critical statements, be they literal or embedded in the very practice of artistic activity.

Although this may appear critically harsh, it is not my intention here to suggest that the artists championed by Bourriaud are somehow in league with the increasingly incircumscribable channels of global capitalism and the data-processing, service-based, information-led economies that the latter promotes. Rather, I am engaging with the terms within which Bourriaud articulates these artists. Bourriaud’s thesis, despite its protestations to the contrary, implies that relational art practices are largely defined within a utilitarian hermeneutic rather than, strictly speaking, a contemplative one: in relational art there is, as I have noted previously, not much to see and the interactive (political) use-value of an artwork tends to be advocated over its value as a contemplative (aesthetic) object. To use the term utilitarian here needs further qualification in the context of my overall discussion. Stemming from the Latin word *utilis*, meaning useful, utilitarianism in the broadest sense is a branch of political ethics that is largely concerned with maximising the conditions within which a community can find both fulfilment and, for want of a better word, happiness.¹⁰ In both intention and practice, utilitarian ideals, from Jeremy Bentham onwards, underwrote our neoliberal global order, an order that is facilitated and maintained by the consumerist-driven commodification of both the private and public sphere; the commercialisation of the substance and form of social communications; and the privatisation of inter-personal and professional relations. The overriding concern for Bourriaud, in this environment, is pre-eminently close at hand: ‘It seems more pressing’, he proposes, ‘to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows’ (RA 45). There is, notwithstanding the generalised sentiment of this statement, a disconcerting corporate-speak underwriting it – which may admittedly have something to do with the translation being used – and the call for a pseudo-ethics of communicating with one another (*it’s good to talk*); a utopic idealism that has, moreover, long since had its unrealistically progressivist day. There would also appear, as previously noted, to be a covert

9 Catherine David, ‘Introduction’, in *Documenta X*, exhibition catalogue, Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997, p 10

10 Bourriaud does address the issue of utility but tends to reify it in terms of ‘exchange value’: ‘We know that, once introduced into the exchange circuit, any kind of production takes on a social form which no longer has anything to do with its usefulness. It acquires an *exchange value* that partly covers and shrouds its primary “nature”. The fact is that a work of art has no *a priori* useful function – not that it is socially useless, but because it is available and flexible, and has an “infinite tendency”. In other words, it is devoted, right away, to the world of exchange and communication, the world of “commerce”, in both meanings of the term’ (RA 42).

reliance on a vision of art in instrumentalist terms that returns us to a view of art in terms of praxis, in so far as the latter suggests a cycle of action (artistic practice) followed by reflection on the viewer's (*participant's*) behalf, and then a subsequent (re)action. Utopianism, in this scenario, is given a decidedly Deleuzian twist that consigns the idealism associated with utopia to a rhizomatic micro- or a-topic sphere that is ultimately of the here and now and relational – drawing on human relations and their immediate social context – in both its constituency and constitution. Nonetheless, there is (dare I say) a hankering after modernist notions of artistic practice making a difference to the society within which it circulates. This yearning after a politically, and therefore socially, responsible art, would also appear to underwrite the philosopher Jacques Rancière's response to a question concerning relational aesthetics. Rancière noted that he considered relational aesthetics:

A contemporary offspring of a wider tradition which was part of modernity – the idea that art asked to suppress itself, to become a real form of life. That idea had a kind of intensity at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially with the Soviet revolution, the idea that painters don't paint their paintings on canvases any more, but are framing a new form of life. Relational art is a kind of late offspring of that tradition and I would say sometimes it becomes a parody of that tradition. Of course, we should not simply make fun of relational art, say it's just 'telling people there's nothing to see in that gallery, but we can discuss'. However, the manifestation of relational art has been very weak.¹¹

On the subject of possible precursors to relational art practices, it is of note that Bourriaud's account is occasionally abbreviated. 'Its [relational art] basic claim – the sphere of human relations as artwork venue – has no prior example in art history, even if it appears, after the fact, as the obvious backdrop to all aesthetic practice, and as a modernist theme to cap all modernist themes' (RA 44). Such statements could be seen as a rhetorical attempt to distance the author from what has gone before in order more fully to define the particularity of relational arts, but in eliding certain practices Bourriaud similarly tends to disregard his own reliance on a degree of idealism that was largely associated with modernism. To Bourriaud's truncated list, for example, we could add Joseph Beuy's performances – and much of 1970s performance art – alongside the diverse gestures that underwrote Fluxus, not to mention Situationism and Dadaism. This is not necessarily to criticise Bourriaud for revivifying an idealistic view of art as a practice – in so far as art as a practice should always be considered (but not necessarily prioritised) in terms of its social effect and politics – as it is to note the extent to which this process is one of reification: the predication, for example, of an ethical abstraction as if it had concrete or political existence. Or, put another way, the proposition that relational art practices produce unprecedented inter-human relations that are ethically and politically cogent – and beyond the compromised relations we associate with a neoliberal world order – needs to be substantiated rather than hypothesised. Again, this occasionally conjectural tone may have something to do with Bourriaud's ultimately open-ended thesis; nevertheless, practical and theoretical open-endedness implies two different conceptual gambits. One, exemplified in art practice, suggests a far-reaching and perhaps radical social inclusiveness; the

11 Jacques Rancière interviewed by Truls Lie, 'Our police order: What can be said, seen, and done'. First published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, Oslo, 8 November 2006 (Norwegian version). Available at: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-08-11-lieranciere-en.html> (accessed 11 January 2007).

12 Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', op cit, p 65

13 Ibid, p 61

14 Ibid, p 78. Bishop has since developed her critique of the reception of relational art practices and the

criteria used to evaluate their 'value', arguing that art criticism increasingly relies on the criteria of artistic self-effacement and an overtly political register that champions social responsibility and an ethics of collaboration in relational art practices. Bishop writes: 'There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art [in these forms of art criticism] because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze and compare such work critically as art.' See Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Art Forum*, February 2006, p 180.

- 15 In albeit truncated terms, the essence of the disagreement between Bishop and Gillick centred on the former's use of Mouffe and Laclau, specifically their deployment of the term 'antagonism'. For Mouffe and Laclau, antagonism and an agonistic social identity are the basis of a democratic order. Mouffe furthered such proposals in *The Return of the Political* when she proposed antagonism as the basis of modern identity: 'When we accept that every identity is relational and that the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an "other" that is going to going to play the role of a "constitutive outside", it is possible to understand how antagonisms arise... This can happen when the other, who was until then considered only under the mode of difference, begins to be perceived as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence. From that moment onwards, any type of we/them relationship, be it religious, ethnic,

other, in theoretical terms, specifically those put forward by Bourriaud, produces an interpretive impasse. To argue open-endedly – without much by way of corroboration – that relational art practices produce radically 'new models of sociability' that exist 'beside or beneath a real economic system' and have, in turn, political repercussions in the broader social sphere, requires that the effects of such practices should of necessity be demonstrated. And this is what *Relational Aesthetics* lacks: a causative, convincing analysis of the politics of the socially inter-subjective relations that it so impassionedly evokes, beyond the suggestion that they address communicative and interrelational breaches in the fabric of modern living. It is with such points in mind that Claire Bishop examined Bourriaud's thesis alongside the models of democratic relations that it encouraged:

I am simply wondering how we decide what the 'structure' of a relational art work comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work's ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context. Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationship produced by a work of art. But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The *quality* of the relationships in 'relational aesthetics' are never examined or called into question... If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced and for whom?¹²

Focusing on two artists, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, Bishop argued that they represented the 'clearest expression of Bourriaud's argument that relational art privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality' – or 'use' value over contemplative value.¹³ In alighting upon these artists in particular, Bishop was concerned with detailing – via the theoretical prism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's 1985 volume *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – a theory of political antagonism that she found wanting in both Tiravanija's and Gillick's work. Bishop proposes that:

The tasks facing us today are to analyse *how* contemporary art addresses the viewer and assess the *quality* of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notion that it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.¹⁴

As to whether or not Bishop is right to question Tiravanija and Gillick as exemplars (or otherwise) of a democratic art in comparison with her own choices for the roles (namely, Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn) – and her own essay was the subject of a stinging riposte from Gillick – her overall point is a valid one in so far as it highlights the thorny issue of the politics of *Relational Aesthetics*, not least what she considers to be its ineffectiveness and naive use of terms such as democracy.¹⁵ The issue can be put thus: does *Relational Aesthetics* assume a transitive relationship between artist, artistic practice and audience – wherein which intentionality, materialisation and reception are somehow viewed as socially unified and politically structured? Or in actuality, is the thesis more paratactical than Bourriaud would admit? More about placing the intentionality of artistic practice and its reception in the sociopolitical sphere and assuming the ethical effect of the former on the

national, economic or other, becomes the site of political antagonism.' See Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London, [1993] 2005, pp 2–3.

- 16 To this we could add a discussion around the extent to which 'aesthetics' and 'politics' have been unnecessarily divided into an antagonistic rather than complimentary relationship. This issue was raised in Sarah James's *Art Monthly* article cited above. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, James observed that aesthetics and politics have been imbricated from the outset. On Rancière's theory, James notes that he 'claims that the so-called modernist narrative misses the point. Whereas it sees aesthetics as the constitution of a sphere of autonomy which has subsequently collapsed in the last decades of the twentieth century, in fact, the terms that it opposes have been tied together since the beginning of the aesthetic regime of art. Crucially, Rancière argues first that in this regime the definition of a specific aesthetic sphere does not withdraw artworks from politics. On the contrary their politicality is linked with that separateness and, second, that the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere is not the autonomy of artworks. When this representational regime of art collapses, artworks are merely defined by their belonging to a specific sphere. But that sphere has no definitive boundaries; the autonomy of art is also its heteronomy.' See James, *op cit*, p 11.

latter without necessarily demonstrating the democratic efficacy of such practices or the 'quality' of the relations they produce. This is not to recommend that we somehow prioritise artistic intentionality; on the contrary, it is to note a degree of ideational elision whereby the fact of audience participation is taken as a sign of political, if not democratic, 'value' without a full analysis of either the political effect or, for that matter, artistic content of that participation. In more succinct terms, Bourriaud's broad use of terms such as conviviality, democracy, dialogue and politics – in the context of contemporary aesthetics – all needs further consideration and qualification if a politics of relational aesthetics is to have purchase in a neoliberal, globalised and service-based economic milieu. And the stakes could not be higher. In a milieu where the political arena seems increasingly compromised, it would appear that aesthetics (specifically the interdisciplinarity of contemporary art practices) is being ever more called upon to provide both insight into politics itself and the stimuli for social change.

Although Bourriaud's text entertains a number of critical abbreviations, including the modes of socialisation being progressed in it, possible precursors to such practices, the need for a radical encompassing of a 'new' public if such practices are to continue, and the issue of the actual politics inherent within relational aesthetics, it would nonetheless be critically inconsistent to dismiss it. In the first instance, it sets out both to reconsider the schema of contemporary art criticism and, perhaps more momentarily, to define a 'movement' of sorts that has come to delineate a prominent body of work and artists working in the 1990s. This is no mean feat and merits serious discussion. However, it is perhaps more to do with the conceptual cul-de-sacs which Bourriaud's thesis leads us down that we find most purchase when it comes to detailing both the empirical and theoretical contours on which a politics of aesthetic form and art criticism can be further progressed.¹⁶ In further considering these notions we can, I would suggest, advance an ideational framework within which to discuss a politics of contemporary aesthetics and the reception of relational art practices. Allied to this is a coextensive topic broadly concerned with the extent to which the usurpation of the one-time certainties associated with aesthetic theory can often overshadow the degree to which aesthetics is being increasingly revisited as a hermeneutic category. The intrinsic suggestion here is that a consideration of the politics of aesthetics can extend aspects of the very theories – be they cultural, political, economic, ethical, social or otherwise – that augured the waning of aesthetics as a criterion in the first place. The politics of aesthetics, far from returning to a pre-theoretical idyll where art was critically, and at times convincingly, sublimated into a series of 'reasoned' emotive responses, effectively reinvigorates the post-theoretical impasse in which art criticism would appear presently to find itself.