

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD INTERVIEWED

ANTHONY GARDNER AND DANIEL PALMER

French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud has become well known for his concept of ‘Relational Aesthetics’, the title of his first book published in France in 1998 [translated into English in 2002]. The concept is summarised as a situation in which “the sphere of human relations constitutes the site of the artwork’s meaning”. In short, artworks should be judged by the interhuman relations they represent, produce or prompt—“relational artworks seek to establish intersubjective encounters [literal or potential] in which meaning is elaborated collectively—rather than in the privatised spaces of individual consumption.”

Bourriaud, born in 1965, belongs to an influential generation of young curators. He curated the seminal exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art, Bordeaux in 1996, featuring most of the artists he mentions in *Relational Aesthetics*. Since 1999, he has been the co-director, with Jérôme Sans, of the dynamic Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Reading *Relational Aesthetics* requires some imagination. It’s a book with no images, save the typically ambiguous documentation of a work by Rirkrit Tiravanija on the cover. Unless we’re intimately familiar with European art of the 1990s, we have to imagine much of the art he describes. In spite or perhaps because of this, the concept has found echoes in Australia in the work of the artist collective DAMP, A Constructed World and nat&ali among others, not to mention various dialogue-based priorities at artist-run spaces such as CLUBS in Melbourne.

Contemporary art is defined by its pluralism and paucity of theorisation. Part of the success of Bourriaud’s book is his ambition to provide a lens through which to see art since the 1990s. Moreover, he appeals directly to the current generation of artists, often contrasting them for example with artists of the 1980s.

Bourriaud was recently in Sydney to give a keynote lecture at *Transforming Aesthetics*, the 2005 Art Association of Australia and New Zealand [NSW Chapter] conference, where his work was subject to scrutiny. He found time from his busy schedule to prepare this interview, conducted by email and also in person at the conference.

AG+DP: Can you elaborate on the concept of ‘Relational Aesthetics’ and its genesis?

NB: I wrote *Relational Aesthetics* to find the common point between the artists that were around me at the time [1995] from Pierre Huyghe to Liam Gillick, Gabriel Orozco or Vanessa Beecroft. I felt strongly that there was something new in their work, but it was never really commented on—critics were always using old categories, like Fluxus theories or appropriation art... Then I saw it—all those works commonly took as a starting point the sphere of human relations.

From the demonstration of cynicism of globalised labour by Santiago Sierra to the convivial spaces of Rirkrit Tiravanija, from the work of Philippe Parreno on sociological formats to the scientific experiments of Carsten Höller, the practices of relational aesthetics are many.

The same way pop art was born, in the sixties out of a mental landscape formed by the emerging society of consumption and the visual matrix offered by marketing devices, the art of the 1990s popped up out of the conjunction of the increasing domination of the industry of services and the apparition of the internet. Communication was not the main thing, it existed before—what was really new in our societies was the importance given to the relationships’ business. All the big issues of the 1990s—like communities, architecture and urbanistic policies, politics, sexual minorities, interactivity—are all derived from this big theme, which is the interhuman. I only tried to describe this landscape—and the success of the book proved to me that I had shot the centre of the target.

On the other hand, all those works allowed me to raise a more philosophical question—this work, does it allow me to enter into a dialogue with it? Could I exist and how, in the space that it defines? Everyone is right to ask him or herself this ethical question before any aesthetic production. A form is more or less democratic—let me just remind you, for all practical purposes, that the totalitarian arts are all, without exception, peremptorily and formally closed in themselves [notably through the insistence on symmetry]. That is, they do not allow the viewer to complete them.

The artist materialises their relation to the world through forms; either as critic or curator, I have to judge these relations—it is a relationship squared, in some way. In any case, an experience. Art proposes a particular occurrence that an inter-subjective ethical imperative underlies. If the term ‘relational aesthetics’ possesses an ethical significance, it would be this—as with tennis, it is about ‘receiving’ a work, like a return of service. Someone shows something to someone, who ‘returns’ the ball or not. We are responsible for this ‘return’, this feedback and this responsibility implies an ethical choice, beyond the aesthetic judgement that it is based on. In this sense, art facilitates or constrains the ‘communal cohesion’, but it equally elaborates dissent, a singularity that is not reducible to values held in common—think about the works of Santiago Sierra, Thomas Hirschhorn or many others...

It is hard to argue against the appeal of the ‘inter-subjective’ ethical imperatives in receiving works of art. But there have been a number of different artistic approaches to such imperatives. Is ‘Relational Aesthetics’ sufficiently flexible to cover often radically different practices, from Beecroft or Huyghe to Sierra or Hirschhorn?

If I could define it more precisely, the definition I published at the end of the book was, as far as I remember, “a set of artistic practices taking as a ground the sphere of human relationships.” By comparison, pop art at the beginning of the 1960s was taking as a ground, a theoretical and practical ground, the spheres of consumption. We get aesthetics as different as minimal art and pop art. So the difference between Santiago Sierra’s work and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work is big enough to justify the fact that it’s not a style, it’s a way of reactivating style. Many of the artists I talk about in *Relational Aesthetics* are using the methods of ‘post-production’ that I describe in my second book, so it’s not by random—to inhabit the world means using the world. But the main thing is that it’s not a style, nor a method, but a mental background. It can shelter many different approaches, from Vanessa Beecroft to Gabriel Orozco, who have nothing in common except that they both ground their work on the relational field.

Is ‘Relational Aesthetics’ capable of evaluating the qualities of relations produced by art?

Many artists are working on it. The danger of it is that some of these new works lead to a certain ‘angelic’ understanding of human relationships, which might be a danger; but that’s not what relational aesthetics is about. It can be angelic, but also mean or harsh. There’s no theory of human relations behind it. There is no ideological package with relational aesthetics, which is really important to understand. Every artist has to build his or her own approach.

But can we ever evacuate ideology from thinking about art?

No. Not at all. Whenever you draw a dot or a line on a canvas, you are brought into ideology. Relational aesthetics is not formalism, but an extension of the notion of form into what I call ‘formation’, which is a dynamic idea of form. An exhibition by Rirkrit Tiravanija provides a very precise form; this is what interests me. It’s not only about the guy who is providing soup to people, it’s how this gesture is transformed into form, that’s the point. Otherwise it wouldn’t be interesting. What is interesting is how it treats the field of aesthetics. Greenbergian formalism is a very limited vision of form, which does not include the actions of Allan Kaprow or the work of Robert Smithson... Or the way artists today like Rirkrit Tiravanija are addressing the notion of form.

You argue that relational operations in art can provide for social change through the inter-relationships constructed by artworks. Yet many of these artworks are exhibited in galleries or museums. Can such artworks effect behavioural change in the ‘existing real’ of daily life if they are located within the walls of art institutions? If so, how?

It’s not that much of a paradox. It is art in general that can provide for social change, as far as I know... How would you know about the Dadaists or the Bauhaus if their work was not shown in museums? If the “micro-utopias” I describe were directly introduced into our daily life, we would not see them as well as we can in the gallery. I don’t see any opposition between the gallery and the street... This opposition existed in the 1960s. Today the gallery is just a place like any other, like a bakery, an advertising agency or a studio... It’s a place that is caught in the net of the economy. They all belong to the global economy. Some works which are proposing new social forms through the art



gallery are samples that can later be applied in everyday life. Consequently, I wouldn't see any difference between Thomas Hirschhorn's altars on the street and in the gallery, because it's caught up as an artist's work. The context is different, but not the object itself. You see it through a pre-existing grid, not as a landscape or a mountain.

*Most of the contemporary artists you focus on in Relational Aesthetics and post-production are western European and North American, as are many of the artists who comprise the alternative modernist genealogy in your recent book, Formes de Vie.*¹

Well, Rirkrit Tiravanija created a very interesting scene in Thailand, which is a very innovative art scene, actually, and I wrote about Surasi Kusolwong or Navin Rawanchaikul. In general, I don't look at artists' passports. *Formes de Vie* is an historical essay on the notion of modernity, a story which starts at the beginning of the nineteenth century and stops in the 1960s. So, yes, indeed, there are more Europeans in this book.

What kinds of lessons can post-colonialism provide for 'Relational Aesthetics', especially given the latter emerges from predominantly 'western capitalist' ways of life, such as the internet, service economies and MP3s?

You could also say it's very Japanese or very Indian, actually. These industries are stronger in India than Switzerland today and Bangalore is a much more important

centre for computers than, say, Stockholm. MP3 allows you to think in a different way, wherever you live, whether in Cameroon, the Netherlands or Japan. It just allows a different way of thinking. The internet is used indirectly in today's art, as photography was mainly used and reconsidered by the Impressionist painters. It is not by random that a very 'relational' scene has emerged in Bangkok, Mexico or in Eastern Europe, more than in any of the big art centres like New York, which is more into traditional forms of art. In Asia or Africa, artists have a very instinctive vision of human relationships as a raw material they can use. Relational art develops itself there, more than Los Angeles. There is a huge stake around it in cities, which don't have a strong economy and do not have contemporary art museums—art, as an activity consisting in producing contacts or social forms, has its future in poorer countries.

A number of art critics have challenged Relational Aesthetics. North American critic Hal Foster said that 'Relational Aesthetics' potential politics marked a shift from "the party a la Lenin to a party a la Lennon".² French-based critics such as Paul Ardenne and Brian Holmes have also questioned the political efficacy of 'Relational Aesthetics' [especially as it begins to form a readily identifiable aesthetic in contemporary European art, even a goal for artists and curators, if not quite a movement]. What is your response to the fairness or otherwise of such criticisms?

The question I raise is—what are their own theories? The planetary success of *Relational Aesthetics* inevitably inspired a lot of grumpy writings, but most of them distort my text in order to be able to criticise it. Paul Ardenne's book is full of misunderstandings and mistakes, even in the description of artworks or dates. I cannot take it seriously, as his notion of 'contextual art' does not bring any significant light on today's artistic landscape.³ Hal Foster was a great writer, but I think he is not informed about today's art. So he tends to mix things up in a quite shallow way, transforming Tiravanija's work into a clownesque happening it never was. Pierre Huyghe or Gabriel Orozco are frequently quoted in my book; are they organising parties? I would like to ask them to read the text, not the gas around it. But it's OK, pop art or minimalism were caricatured that way in their times and it took some years before the works were accepted with their full theoretical implications and with the newness they carry.

In your keynote talk at 'Transforming Aesthetics' Conference, you explored a concept you call 'altermodernism'. Could you briefly outline this concept?

What I coined as 'altermodern', as I see it in today's artworks, is a new form of modernity taking into account the globalisation of economies and the chaotic field of contemporary culture. Our new modernity is based on translation. What matters today, given the increasing movement of standardisation and planetarisation, is to translate the cultural values of individuals and groups and to keep them alive and productive, to render them 'universal' [understandable by a foreigner]. That is, to connect them to the world network. It evacuates nostalgia and any reactionary will to reintegrate the past. A modernity based on difference and specificities, more than yesterday's universalism, which was the core of modernism. On the other hand, we are now bombarded with data accumulating at an exponential rate, from an incredible range of sources and nobody can take an area of knowledge in its totality, even if he or she is a specialist. The old hierarchies have collapsed, verticality has disappeared—we have to explore a totally horizontal world. I see altermodernism as a 'reloading process' of modernism according to twenty first century issues; a modernism connected to the creolisation of cultures, the fight for autonomy and the possibility of singularity in a more and more standardised world.

Finally, there is a lot of excitement about your work in Australia, especially given the strong artist-run spaces in cities like Melbourne, Sydney or Adelaide. Many of these spaces rely on dynamic relations and networks between

artists, audiences and other spaces, using networks common in the artworld to establish new modes of living and communicating that may be applied beyond the artworld itself. Do you think these practices fit in with 'Relational Aesthetics' as you've outlined them, or are they doing something different though parallel to relational aesthetics?

Of course. They all are mainly concerned by networks, discussions, contacts, face-to-face relationships with the beholder, meetings... That's exactly it and it perfectly matches my purpose.

Notes

¹ Published in 2003, *Formes de Vie: L'Art Moderne et l'Invention de Soi* provides a conception of modernism as governed by the rubric 'make your life a work of art'. Beginning with the three figures of the alchemist, the dandy and the portrait of Dorian Gray, Bourriaud traces a genealogy to contemporary rejections of aesthetic and social homogenisation. Key figures in this genealogy include Marcel Duchamp, Piero Manzoni and the Internationale Situationniste through to Allan Kaprow and Gordon Matta-Clark. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Formes de Vie*, Paris: Denoël, 2003

² Hal Foster, 'Arty Party', *London Review of Books*, Vol 25 No 23, 4 December 2003: 21–22

³ See Paul Ardenne, *Un Art Contextuel*, Paris: Flammarion, 2002, in which Ardenne argues that contemporary artists are frequently understood as socially implicated actors and their artworks governed by the concrete contexts in which they are located. He is one of the co-authors of *Contemporary Practices: Art as Experience*, trans. Stephen Wright et al., Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1999

Above: Nicolas Bourriaud during the 'Transforming Aesthetics' Conference
Photo courtesy Associate Professor Jill Bennett and the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand
Below: Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* [Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002] showing Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled [One Revolution Per Minute]*, 1996, at Le Consortium, Dijon, France

